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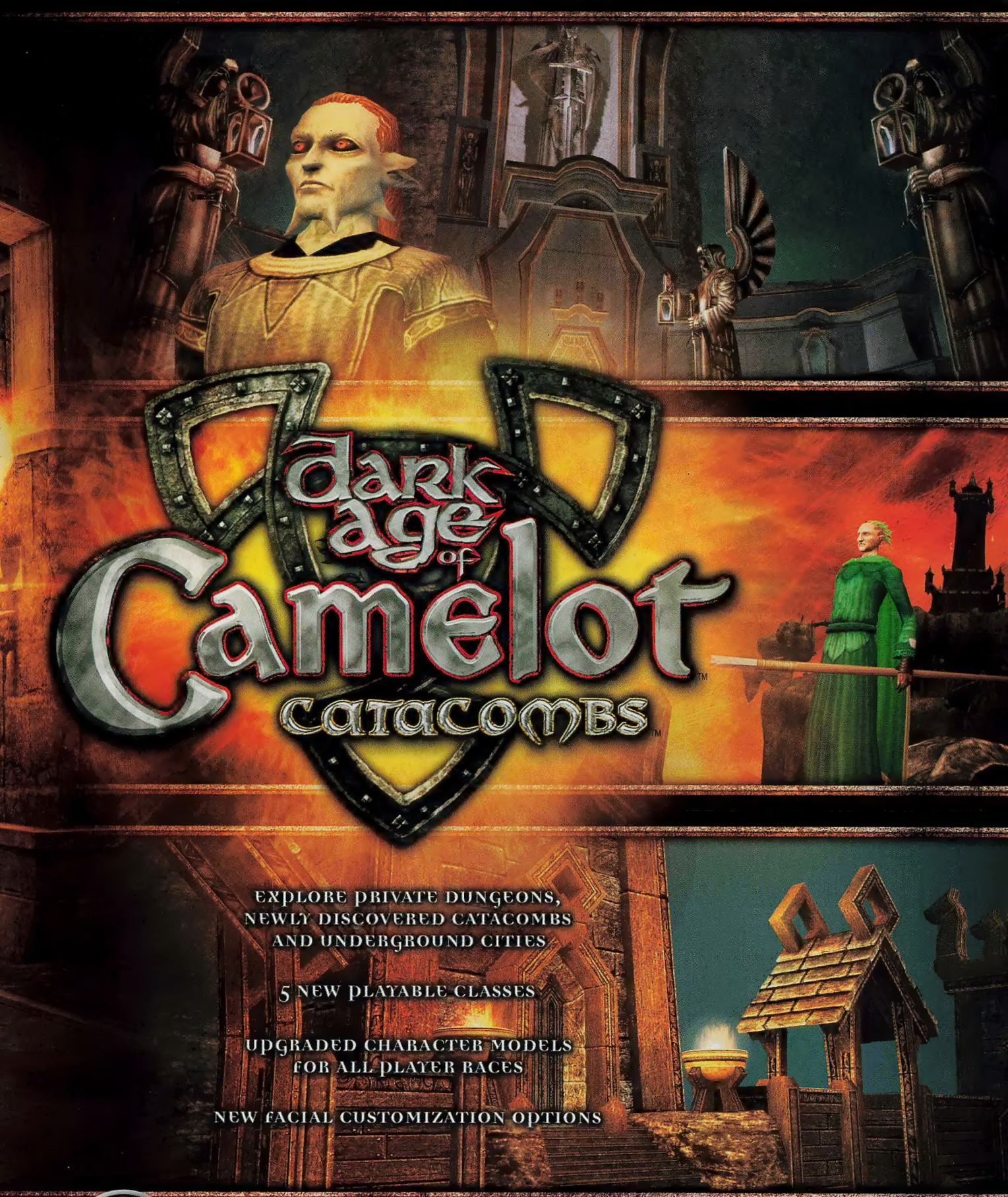

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Violence

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You think Darth Vader is scary? Have you seen Jeff Green gargle peanut butter?

18 Letters
Our devious plan of getting you to write more worked. Well, sorta, kinda, not really. C'mon, don't be afraid. We won't ridicule you...much.

26 Radar
Another month, another batch of insightful news stories you won't see anywhere else. Stuff like people selling ads within videogames, **Marvel Entertainment** suing **City of Heroes**, even how **Chris Taylor** likes pantsless AIM chats. Wait, we're not done yet! Just in time for Valentine's Day, we take you on a **dream date** with a girl that (gasp!) likes playing games. Yes, folks, a little bit of everything for everybody.

40 Previews
Not another zombie game, you say? Well, **Stubbs the Zombie** may just surprise you. Flip to the Previews section for a sneak peek at that game, as well as in-depth looks at **Dungeon Siege II** and **Silent Hunter III**.

COVER STORY

BACK IN BLACK

A long time ago in a theater far, far away, George Lucas brought us his vision of the future. **Star Wars**, the movie that launched a million nerds, lives on, but the games it has spawned haven't always lived up to the hype. Now, as *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* nears release, we've got the scoop on the next big RTS game that's trying something bold and different. Keep reading: There's also a behind-the-scenes update on all things *Star Wars* on the horizon.

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78 Reviews
We've got a killer lineup for you this month. **The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie** alone would be worth the whole section, but we've also managed to squeeze in **Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines**, **Pirates!**, **Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth**, and **Half-Life 2**.

92 Tech
Good thing these pages are waterproof—otherwise, you'd ruin the issue drooling all over this year's **Ultimate Gaming Machines**, the dream PCs you can't afford.

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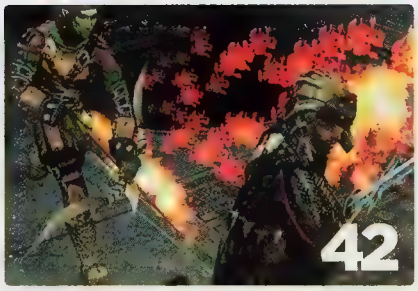
WOW VS. **EQ2**
Just because we want to get lots of hate mail, we decided to pit two of the biggest MMOs ever against one another. Want to see how they measure up? Check it out.



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103 Check Out

We're looking to make Check Out a little more about the audience participation—mostly because we're not entirely convinced that you're reading the section. Be on the lookout for clues and you could win yourself a little something-something.

114 Tom vs. Bruce

Actually, it's Tom versus Erik this month 'cause Bruce chickened out. Wait, he's sick. Yeah, that's it. So come with us to **Middle-earth**, where an epic battle awaits....

118 Scorched Earth

If there's anything better than complaining, it's complaining about other people complaining.

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THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

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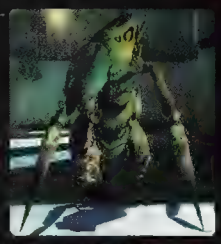

Surprise! According to *CGW* fans, *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3* are taking turns topping the page, despite the many moons the latter has been out. But keep an eye on that list, because following close behind and gaining ground is *World of WarCraft*.

CGW.RYAN.1UP.COM

Ryan is such an organized guy. With so many things on his plate, he still manages to write in his blog once a month. This may not seem like an incredible feat to those of you who update every two hours, but Ryan is religious in his "sporadic" updating. Check out his latest one-liners, then barrage him with e-mails to get cracking.

BOARDS.1UP.COM

Want to know the secrets we whisper here at *CGW*? Like a million monkeys working on a million typewriters, we come up with some pretty funny bloopers. You may not hear many juicy tidbits, but there's enough stupidity to go around. Come see all the randomness that is our genius and urge us on. After all, you're our inspiration.

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IS TO DESTROY THEM.
CGA TAT TGA

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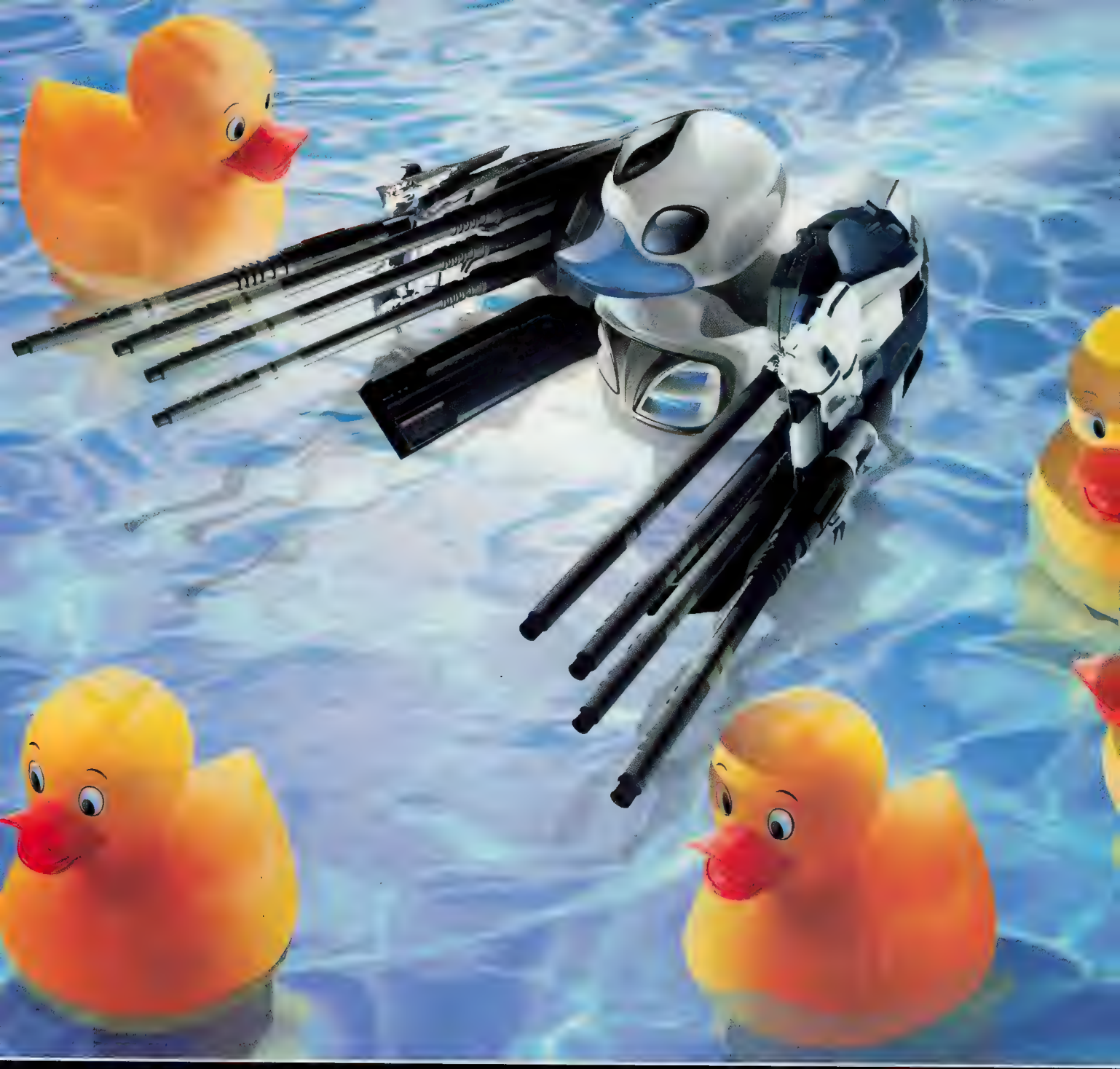

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Won't get fooled again?

Yeah, sure, you're not going to Episode III. We believe you

Well, kids, there it is: another *Star Wars* cover. Yay! I haven't actually done a count of the *CGW Star Wars* covers over the years, but let's just say there have been a lot of them. The fact that there hasn't been a good *Star Wars* movie in over 20 years has really done nothing to diminish the popularity of this franchise. We can't help it—we're like Charlie Brown with the football that way. No matter how many times we get burned and say we're done with *Star Wars* forever, the sad fact is that we will all buy advance tickets and get in line early on opening day for *Episode III*, like eager little kids, hoping that we'll get blown away again.

Whether that is going to happen or not, I cannot tell you. I am quite a talented fellow, as anyone who's seen me gargle peanut butter can tell you, but soothsaying is not part of my skill set. I can tell you, however, that the *Star Wars* games have been on a nice roll now for a good long time, which goes part of the way toward explaining our ongoing affection for the franchise. This month, we look at the new crop of *Star Wars* games, and there is some great stuff in there, including *KOTOR II*, the sequel to last year's Game of the Year.

In other news, check out my review of *Half-Life 2*, which finally makes an appearance months after the game's release. Why? Because I wouldn't play it on the game company's terms, at its office. Like I said last month, we're done with that at *CGW*. I waited for the boxed release and played it the way you play games: at home on a standard PC not custom-built by the game company. And guess what? I liked it, but my experience was a little different than the frothing at the mouth of those who got to play it early. Big surprise, huh?

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR
Lando Calrissian, and not just because Billie Dee Williams did those Colt 45 malt liquor commercials. He's a little bit light side, a little bit dark side...for me, that "works every time."

ROBERT COFFEY
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
The question should be, Who haven't I dated back when role-playing a lap-dancing Zabrak stripper in *Galaxies*? Forced to choose, I'd probably opt for Lando because he knows how to treat a lady right.

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR
I'm always a sucker for a pretty face—and, apparently, green headtails. Remember the way that slave girl danced in *Return of the Jedi*? Well, let's just say that whatever happens in Jabba's palace stays in Jabba's palace.

RYAN SCOTT
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Zam Wesell, the hot shape-shifting bounty hunter chick from *Episode II*. Just think of the variety! Well, as long as she promises not to kill me.

REBECCA GROSS
INTERN
Jabba...live tongue

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR
I can't believe that nobody picked Princess Leia in that hot bikini from *Return of the Jedi*! Hell, why stop there? I think I can swing dating her "mom," Natalie Portman, as well.

PAULA STRINGFELLOW
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR
I can't see how any woman wouldn't pick Lando. But, since he's taken, my second pick is Chewbacca. Why? He's big...he's the strong, silent type. Wait a sec. He moans a lot, doesn't he?

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

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Letters

Welcome to the nattering nabob zone

XUBERANT XCITEMENT!

Just wanted to let you know that I loved your review of *The Sims 2* in the November 2004 issue [#244] of *Computer Gaming World*—mostly because of the X titles found throughout the review. X is one of my all-time favorite bands. I can't remember how many times I saw them at the Whiskey A-Go-Go, the Roxy, and even once at the Greek Theater. That made me break out all of my old X LPs for a listen. I have them all.

I never really thought *The Sims 2* would be the kind of game I would like, but your review has inspired me to give it a try. Not just because of the X references, but because you have inspired me to drop my "I'm too hardcore of a gamer to play a grandma-wuss game like that" attitude. I like the concept of aspirations to give the game some goals and sense of achievement—the lack of which kept me away from the first one and all of its expansions.

Ron Judge

You're going to like *The Sims 2*, Ron—it's just about the best thing under the big black sun.

DEAD HEADS

I just read Scorched Earth [in the Holiday 2004 issue, #246], and Robert is definitely not alone with this "syndrome."

While my example isn't as bad as some of yours, several years ago when I played the original *Tribes* as much as humanly possible, I found myself driving down the road in my car when I saw a dead rabbit in the middle of the road about 200 yards in front of me.

Now, a little background just in case you were not a big *Tribes* player: Whenever a player died and he had not yet used his health pack, another player could run over the dead body and pick up the health pack and use it. Of course, knowing this tactic, other players would lay mines "under" dead players since the mines were hard to see. So, my standard tactic was to always shoot a dead body with a disc as I flew or ran toward it to get rid of any mines.

Back to my rabbit sighting. As I saw the rabbit, my first instinct was to try to find the key to switch my weapon to the disc launcher. I actually turned on the windshield wipers before I realized what I was doing. I haven't had any other moments since, but that was sort of a scary one for me.

Felix Pierdolla

Man, your "Gaming Has Ruined My Life" article in the Holiday 2004 issue hit home. I remember once falling from my bunk bed when I was 14 and wondering how much damage I took. I think this may have had more to do with *D&D* than computer games, but it's pretty much the same thing.

Dan Kelman

We don't know what to say, fellas. So in lieu of a snappy comeback, check out this giant catfish.

Journals Out

Hey everyone, maybe I'm alone on this, but lately I've been extremely bored with the letters section. Obviously, it isn't the most important part of the mag, but I really think you could get more out of it than the randomness that fills it today. My idea is that every month you give readers a topic to write in about for the next issue, like "If you could make any game, what would it be?" or "What will gaming be like in 20 years?" or "How important are graphics to you in a game?" I dunno...it might sound stupid, but I truly think it would make for some interesting and funny stuff to read if you did it.

Bender844 from 1UP.com

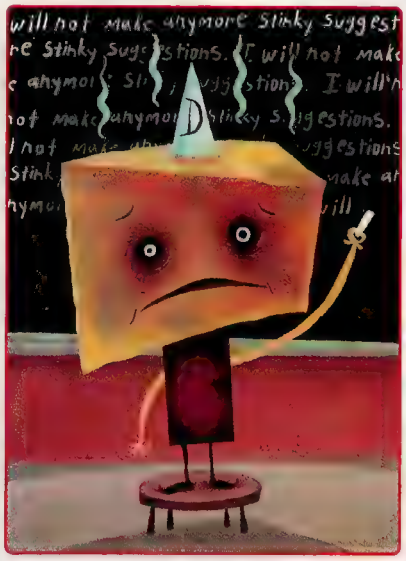


ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL SLACK

Personally, we had enough theme writing assignments back when we were flunking out of high school. But, hey, if it'll make you happy, here's Topic Numero A: What's that smell?

YAN CAN WRITE

I have been reading your magazine for three years or so now, but I have never tried to e-mail you. I must say that your magazine has been awesome and fun to read. The reason is your hilarious "dumbassity." In your December 2004 issue, you wrote in response to a letter that "'Penny Arcade' was getting too R-rated," and as a result, you stopped publishing it. Right across the page was your ad for *Playboy: The Mansion*. Keep up the good work, and don't lose that "dumbassity."

Yan

If you're going to lambaste us, Yan, please do so using appropriate language. It's "dumbassedness," not "dumbassity." Criminey.

RATED EX

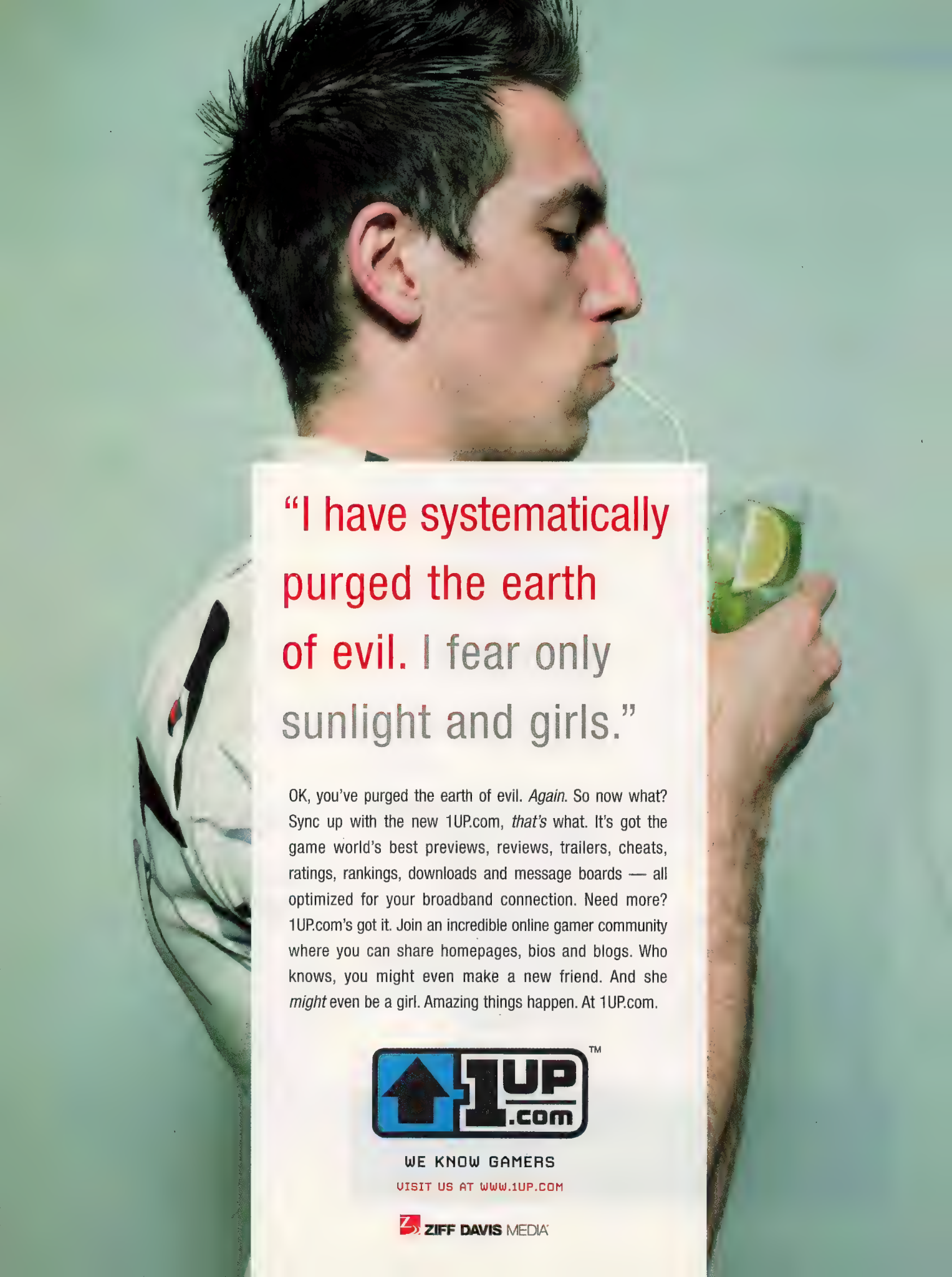
Why do games start off with one rating but then change for the sequel? *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* is rated M, but *The Sands of Time* is rated T. I was really looking forward to this game, but my parents are really strict with violent games, so I won't be getting it. But there are a lot of other games like that, like *Ghost Recon 2* (but that series went from M to T) and

Mail Bites

This is sort of like being invited to a party where you are the only one on the guest list.
—GigaShadow on 1UP.com

Does anyone else thinks it's funny that there's a *World of WarCraft* ad right in the middle of the *EQ2* preview in the latest issue?
—Joseph Kvam

I'll give you swift, painless deaths instead of the usual transmigration of your soul with a tasty muffin.
—Gareshra on 1UP.com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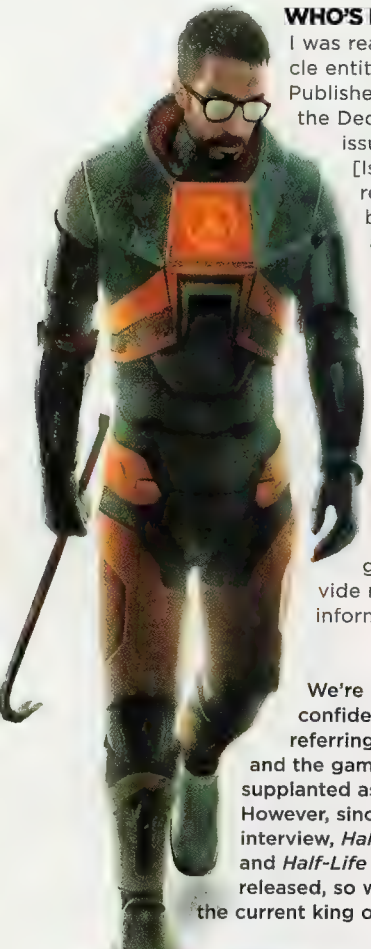
some others I can't think of (ha-ha). Well that's what I have to say. There.

Sam Atherton

Do us a favor, Sam, and thank your parents for actually looking up from their double soy decaf mochachinos long enough to do some honest-to-goodness parenting. Yeah, it sucks to be denied the object of your desire, but we've made peace with that whole no supermodel harem problem, and we're pretty confident you can get over this disappointment. As for the rating changes, well, it's pretty much an issue of publishers trying to garner bigger audiences—and it's extra ironic in your examples because Ubisoft puts out both of those games, and it apparently thinks the Prince needs to butch up while the *Ghost Recon* boys need to show their softer sides to get more buyers.



WHO'S NO. 1?

I was reading the article entitled "Console Publishers Get PC" in the December 2004 issue of *CGW* [Issue #245] and read the quote by Mark Rein about the PC having the two biggest-selling games of all time. I searched the Internet but couldn't find a list of the top-selling games. I was wondering if you guys could provide me with the information.

Twigs

We're pretty confident Mark was referring to *The Sims* and the game it supplanted as No. 1, *Myst*. However, since that interview, *Halo 2* (for Xbox) and *Half-Life 2* have been released, so who knows who the current king of the hill is.

SLIM FAST PLAN

I'm a longtime reader/subscriber—since the Sipe days—and I'm distressed to see all the weight you've lost in recent times. Especially since your main competition has gained weight. Eat something, for crying out loud—you're too skinny!

Bob Ingber

You caught us, Bob. We've been eating the pages. We can't get enough paper; we just loooove eating paper.

NOT GONNA HAPPEN

If it is acceptable to publish games that feature characters that are hardcore criminals that can murder police officers, such as the *GTA* series, why is it not acceptable to publish an FPS game that features a character that is a World War II German soldier that fights *for* the Third Reich? And I don't mean in the multiplayer mode either, but as the main part of the game.

I've played all the *MOH* games, *Castle Wolfenstein*, and *Call of Duty*, and now I want my Iron Cross!

William Valiant

We'd like to say we're sorry, William, but we're not. The odds of a pro–Third Reich shooter ever getting past the Very Bad Idea stage of development are significantly south of zero.

Ye Olde Mailbag

Here at *CGW*, we believe in free speech—which pretty much explains our paychecks. If you'd like to join in, send us your pithy observations, urbane witticisms, sly compliments, and unhinged ranting to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. Operators are standing by.

Mail Bites

I know the people at Valve had their code stolen, but they can't treat all of us like "evil-doers." I'm talking about the one- to two-hour, five- or six-step install process for *Half-Life 2*.

—Brian McGowan

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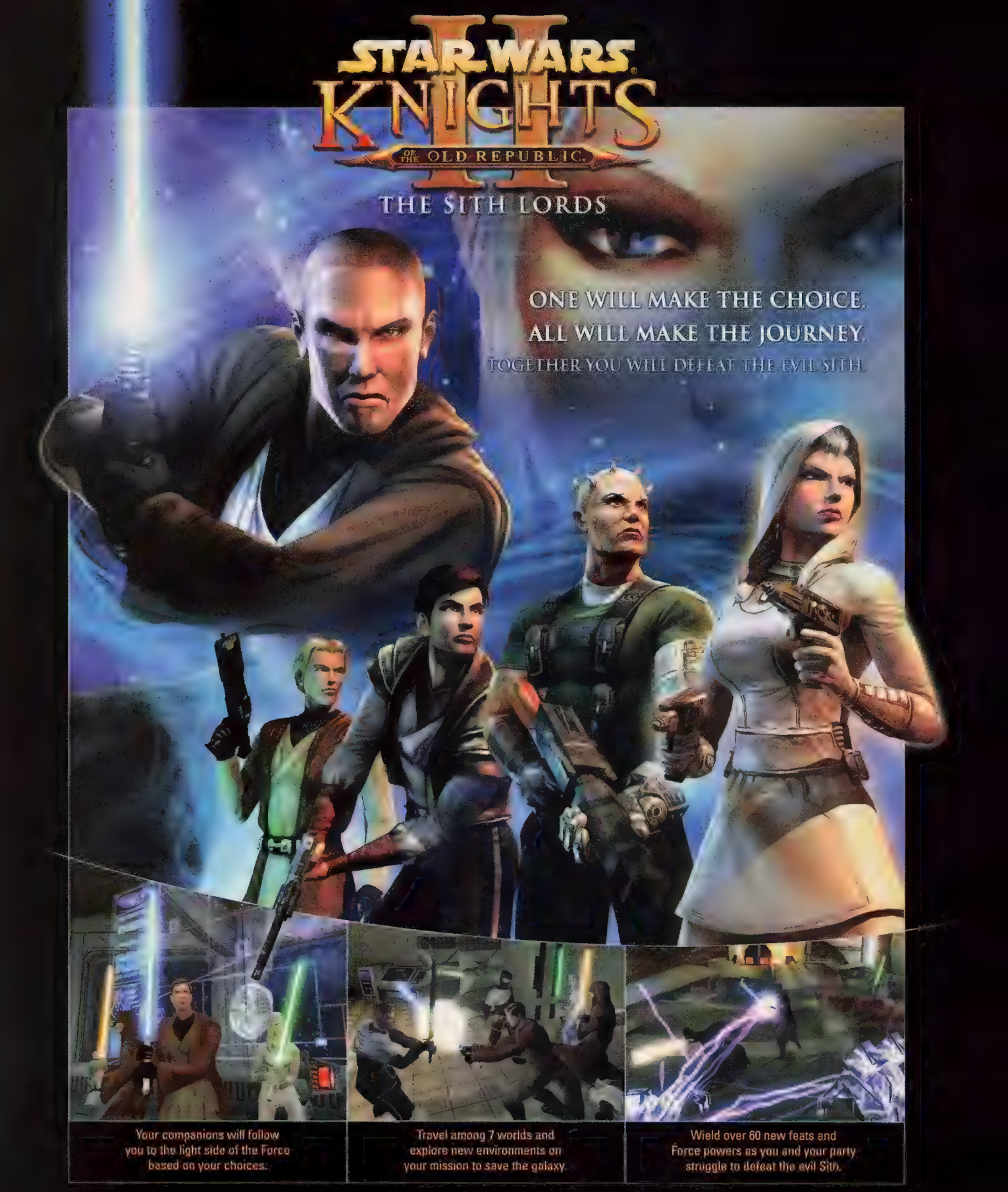
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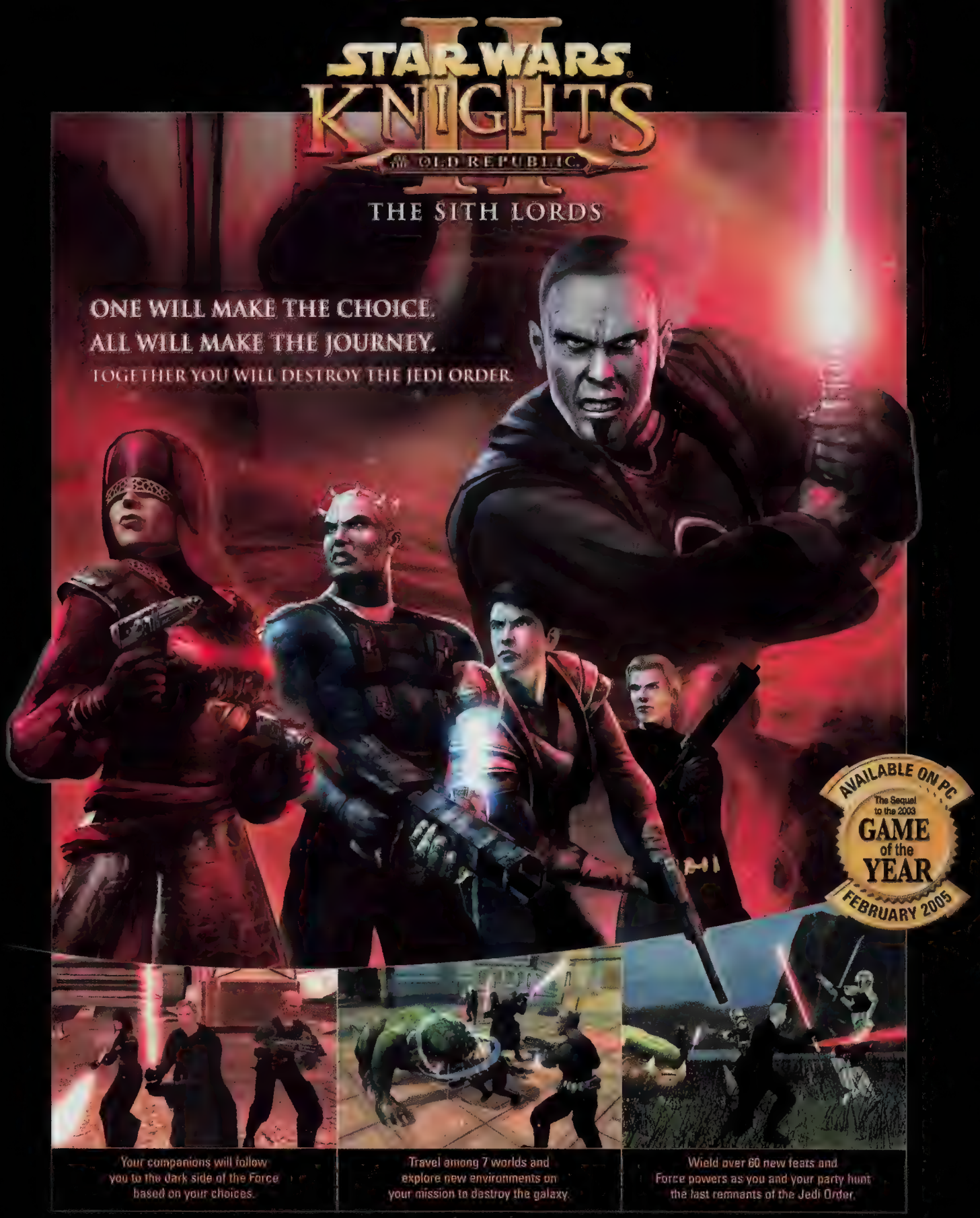
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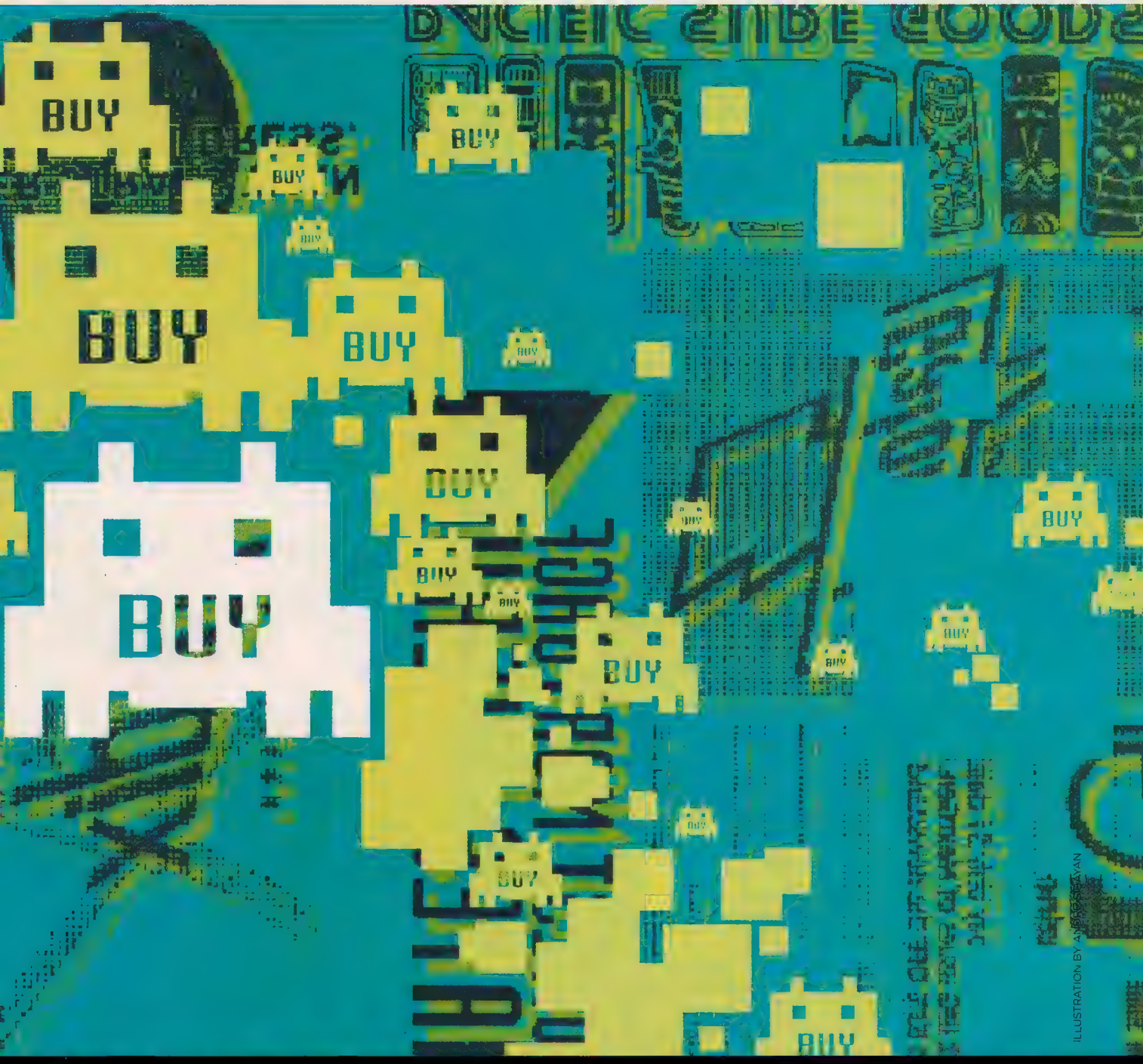


ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW SELYAN

HARD SELL

Branding Iron

VIRTUAL BILLBOARDS GET BIGGER IN GAMES

Inside

Not So Super
Marvel is suing the makers of *City of Heroes*. Why? Because you can re-create Marvel characters in the game.

JFK Reloaded
Most tasteless game ever? It's a close call, but no.

She Got Game
Just in time for Valentine's Day, a writer gets set up with a girl who likes playing games—in a good way.

Sam Fisher gets updates on his Sony Ericsson phone in *Pandora Tomorrow*.

Gamers are a captive audience, so it only makes sense that marketing folks want to place ads within games. That, in fact, is nothing new. But now that mainstream advertisers are getting savvier and the technology is available to track what we're seeing in games, are we about to see a major explosion in in-game advertising?

Today, videogames are a fraction of the promotional world at large. "Last year, we estimate less than $20 million was spent by advertisers on in-game advertising," says Activision's president Kathy Vrabeck, compared to billions spent on TV. Developments on the horizon suggest that figure is about to grow, though.

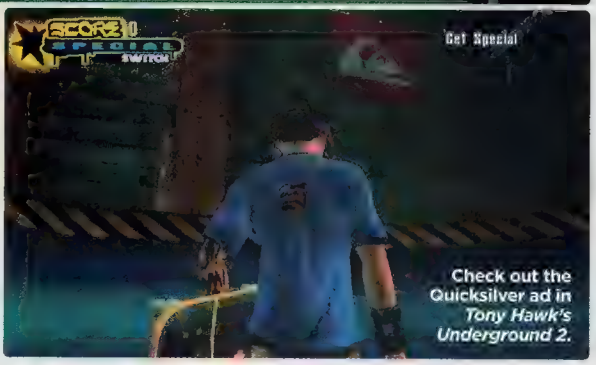
NIELSEN'S RATINGS GAME

Activision is in the second phase of a research project with Nielsen, measuring how many 18- to 34-year-old males' eyes interact with ads in videogames today. Phase one surveyed gamers in focus tests, while phase two takes the survey home, using *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* to measure players' responses to bits of Chrysler product placement. Copies of the game provided to a small sample of players will send some information—essentially, how often players are exposed to Jeep logos—back to Activision over a limited time through spring 2005.

This could grow into a more far-reaching information-gathering system. Activision, Electronic Arts, and others want a universal standard for auditing game ads, like Nielsen's TV ratings, to draw more advertisers' interest. Some firms, like Europe's Down Under, are already promoting metrics for judging the effectiveness of in-game advertising, but they're not widely accepted yet.

What the future holds is an open question. Activision is keeping mum about future phases of its research, particularly the question of how invasive its auditing methods might be.

Some publishers are taking a bigger step forward. By 2006, more than 25 PC games from Ubisoft, Vivendi, Take-Two, and others—including *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* and *Rainbow Six 3*—will have ads injected into gameplay through the Internet. The technology, from British company Massive, updates in-game ads and measures the attention paid to them.



Check out the Quicksilver ad in *Tony Hawk's Underground 2*.

"You can't take gamers out of gameplay [with ads]." —Mitch Davis, CEO, Massive

Though delivered like Web ads, Massive's ads will be relatively subtle: a billboard in a city or the computer Sam Fisher uses. "It must be contextually relevant," explains Massive's CEO, Mitch Davis, echoing findings from Activision's survey. "You can't take gamers out of gameplay."

Other publishers aren't sure the future is now, though. "The percentage of sellable inventory that's connected online through PC and Xbox titles isn't yet a broad business," says Julie Shumaker, EA's director of in-game ad sales. In other words, those ads won't necessarily reach enough eyes to justify the expense of the technology. EA's still using more conventional methods to judge the impact of its ads, though. *Need for Speed Underground 2* players have been polled via the Web regarding their preference for everything from cars to deodorant to condensed chicken soup.

SIDE BENEFITS

While taking what Shumaker calls a "wait-and-see" approach toward serving ads straight into games, EA has used ads to power some of its premium online game content. Online leagues in *Madden NFL 2005* were paid for by a Chrysler sponsorship, and Chrysler will soon sponsor more premium content for *NASCAR 2005*. In both cases, ads, not subscription fees, picked up the tab.

Will ads take more pressure off gamers' wallets in the future? Not necessarily—EA's partnership with Chrysler, brought on by this year's *Madden* development cycle, was an exception, not a firm promise of free stuff to come. "We don't look at this as offsetting costs," says Shumaker. "It's increasing revenue." Ads may add realism to the games of 2005 and beyond, but that doesn't mean we get a free ride. **Dave F. Smith**

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

News and views from the Wild West

The Good
WOW!

We knew that *World of WarCraft* would be good—but wow! This game rocks! We've already run two cover stories on it, and that might not be doing it justice. It's as addictive as *Diablo*—with thousands of other people along for the ride at the same time. If you haven't signed up for it yet, give it a shot. Not convinced? Read the review in this very issue!

The Bad
Getting Steamed

On day one, you buy the DVD collectors' edition of *Half-Life 2* and what happens? It takes all day to install because you need to log on to Valve's overloaded servers even to play the single-player game. The problem has eased since the release, but c'mon. What did the company expect? What if, God forbid, you wanted to play the game when you weren't online?

The Ugly
Lame Lawsuits

Marvel is setting a bad precedent by suing the makers of *City of Heroes*. In the end, it can only hurt you, the gamer, and your ability to create mods or characters in games you play. What's next? Marvel patrolling schoolyards and arresting the first kid who grabs a garbage can lid and claims to be Captain America? We're now throwing our Wolverine Underoos away.

SUPERVILLAINY

Secret Origin: Greed?

Comic-book publisher files not-so-marvelous lawsuit aimed at *City of Heroes*

No superheroic banter was heard. Not even a Hulk-inspired "Marvel SMASH!" was bellowed as Marvel Entertainment sent its legal minions to deliver a blow by suing NCsoft and Cryptic Studios.

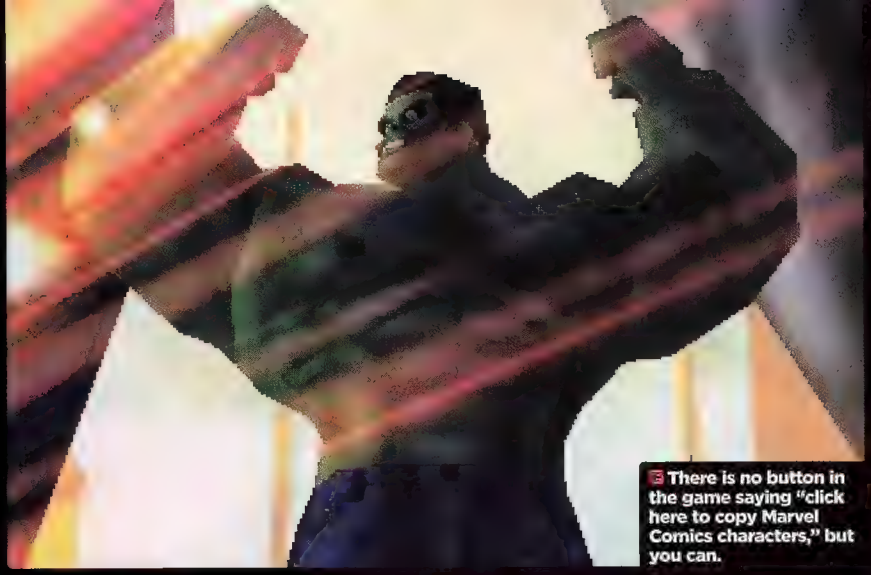
Marvel's attorneys stated in the official complaint, dated November 10, 2004, that the "Defendant's Creation Engine facilitates and, indeed, encourages players to create and utilize heroes that are nearly identical in name, appearance, and characteristics to characters belonging to Marvel [and others]." So, is this a cut-and-dry case of defending one's intellectual property? Not even close.

BASELESS CLAIMS

"This lawsuit is not uncommon in the technology industry, where, increasingly, content providers are suing platform owners to get at the allegedly infringing activities of their users," says Beth Noveck, A law professor at New York Law School and an organizer of the State of Play conference (www.nyls.edu/stateofplay) on law and

1UP.com NEWS FEED

Unfriendly Ghosts: Hardly a surprise, North and South Korea want nothing to do with Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon 2*. It's not a bad game...it just might tick off Kim Jong Il, since the game takes place in North Korea.



There is no button in the game saying "click here to copy Marvel Comics characters," but you can.

videogames, Noveck saw a case of this magnitude coming. "We don't sue Microsoft if someone uses *Word* to plagiarize a book," she says. According to her, Marvel's claims are too broad, attempting to stifle an important new technology. "Even the Supreme Court has said that where a technology has a substantially non-infringing use, the technology itself must be allowed to flourish." In order to prevail on its claim of contributory copyright infringement, Marvel basically has to convince the court that *City of Heroes* was built expressly with the intent of violating copyrights. Noveck goes on to say that "there's no button in the game telling players 'to create Wolverine, click here.'" The game permits gamers to create original heroes from generic character archetypes. Copying the idea of a superhero does not violate copyright or trademark law. Those who are re-creating recognized characters are carefully policed by Cryptic Studios. If unchecked, there would likely be an army of Spider-Men roaming the streets, but there aren't.

The real danger here, according to Noveck, is that if the broad claims in this case are successful, it could set back the creativity of player-created content and scare game companies into restricting the free expression of players in videogames and virtual worlds.

"To be honest, I think that if someone creates a [Marvel] hero, it's actually flattery, not someone looking to rip you off," adds Jeff Morris, who, as a producer at Epic Games, has seen his share of IP content within the modding community. People make skins of their favorite comic and cartoon characters to frag each other in *Unreal Tournament 2004*. They make mods, like *Troopers*, and mimic the *Star Wars* universe. If this case succeeds, what will it mean to mod makers? Will they have to look over their shoulders? Epic Games indemnifies itself in its end user license agreement since it gives away the tools to create virtually any type of content its customers wish. When someone stands to profit by actually selling the mod, *then* it could become a problem.

KNEECAPPING THE COMPETITION

Morris, also an avid comic fan, had another perspective on the matter: There are only so many recognizable powers out there that people want to pretend they have in games. Marvel claiming the rights to anybody that can shoot beams out of their eyes is just frustrating—and absurd. "What this all could be boiling down to is that Marvel has its own plans to create a superhero MMO," he says. *City of Heroes* has done a lot of things right and will be well entrenched by the time Marvel's game comes out. "This whole lawsuit could all be a way to kneecap the competition in a preemptive strike."

Whether Marvel likes it or not, its characters are all pop-culture icons at this point. All this exposure, especially in games, "helps strengthen the brand and drives more people back to read the comics and see the movies," says Noveck. But Marvel's lawsuit is already backfiring. Countless message boards have been lit up over the proceedings. Some people question how Marvel, which constantly apes DC Comics' characters, can file suit, while others are supporting an all-out boycott of Marvel properties. Said one post: "If [Marvel] only understands the world in terms of dollars and cents, fine. When we hurt their bottom line, then maybe they'll listen." **Darren Gladstone**

"We don't sue Microsoft if someone uses *Word* to plagiarize a book."

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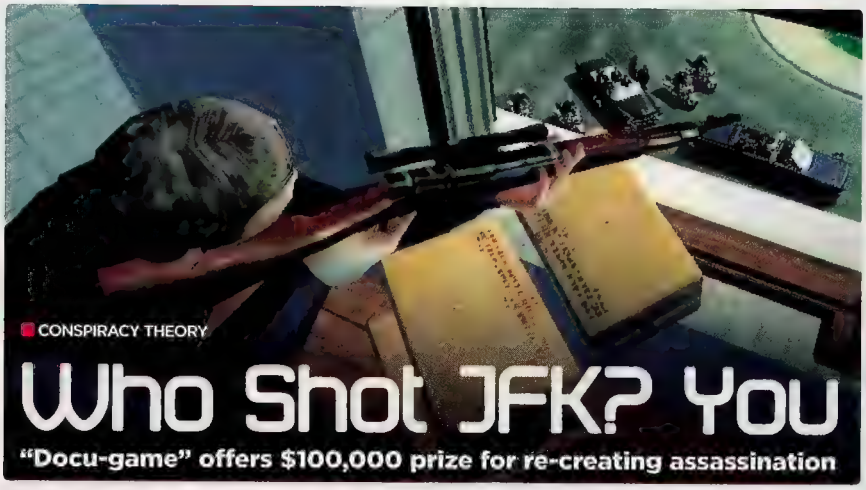

CONSPIRACY THEORY

Who Shot JFK? You

"Docu-game" offers $100,000 prize for re-creating assassination

It's grim, but no one can deny the public's fascination with the 1963 assassination of JFK in Dallas, Texas. Here's *JFK Reloaded* (www.jfkreloaded.com), a minigame that maps out the course of events on that fateful day 41 years ago.

When asked if the game may be a bit crude, a spokesperson put it this way: "The subject matter obviously hits close to home [in the U.S.], but the developers in Glasgow, Scotland, are genuinely fascinated with what happened."

The "game" lasts less than a minute, and you are cast as Lee Harvey Oswald. After the motorcade leaves the scene, the game replays events from multiple camera angles and grades you according to how it "really" happened. Drop $10 for the full version and you get a shot at winning $100,000 in prize money—though the real prize should go to anyone who can explain why anyone thought this was a good idea. **Darren Gladstone**

Space Case

John Carmack shows that he has the right stuff

He may not have won, but John Carmack still had a blast getting involved in the X Prize contest. It's all well documented on the Armadillo Aerospace website (www.armadilloaerospace.com). Tim Willits told us recently that "[Carmack] is like a 13-year-old kid that just built his first toy." Anyhow, we got our hands on this picture of Carmack floating and figured you might as well see how much fun he's having. Interesting side note: Apparently, the military has contacted Armadillo Aerospace about using its technology to economically test missiles.

NEWS FEED ▸▸ Warez pirates steamed: Valve disabled approximately 20,000 Steam accounts that used a cheat to download *Half-Life 2* without purchasing it. ▸▸

5, 10, 15 YEARS AGO IN *CGW*

What we said when you were nursing

5 Years Ago, February 2000

Thanks to the skewed space-time continuum in which the magazine publishing world resides, we coughed up 29 end-of-the-year-release reviews in one jam-packed issue. Little did we know we were playing not only the eventual Game of the Year, *Unreal Tournament*, which we claimed "shot the pulse-pounding mayhem of multiplayer shooters to new heights," but also the eventual Coaster of the Year, the unbearably dreadful *Nocturne* (it edged out the also-execrable *Ultima: Ascension*, reviewed in this issue as well).

10 Years Ago, February 1995

While today's kids while away their childhoods pretending to be gangsters in the *Grand Theft Auto* games, once upon a more idyllic time, games offered us the chance to experience something more in tune with Mother Earth. Witness the very odd idea of *Wolf*, which bought a two-page ad extolling how thoroughly it let you re-create the excitement of being a flea-ridden wildlife pariah, er, noble beast. Finally, a game that aspired to something higher, something—ah, let's be frank. It was crap. *They* knew it. Why else would they emphasize canine mating twice in the same icky ad?

15 Years Ago, February 1990

Considering the sensory overload clobbering gamers over the head every time they install a game, it's kinda hard to believe that a mere decade and a half ago we were covering the burgeoning phenomenon of *sound* in gaming. Our winter CES article diligently reported on three different sound standards intended to bring audio and "gasp" actual speech to gaming! We also reported on the upgrade to VGA graphics for games like *Battlechess* and *Silent Service*. Ah, the good old days. Not so incredibly good in retrospect.

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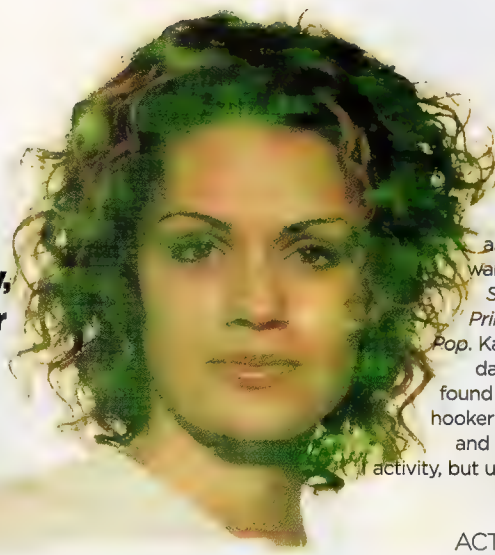
DATING ADVICE

She Got Game

Just in time for Valentine's Day, our reporter dates a girl gamer



When discussing girl gamers, most articles look into the psychology of why girl gaming isn't more common. And without exception, female gamers are asked to reveal their secrets and tell us how we can get girls to play games with us. This is plain stupid. If you somehow gain some magical insight into controlling your girlfriend's hobbies, don't waste it on a seeking a *World of WarCraft* partner. Hypnotize her into loving topless hula-hooping and vacuuming.

We're all fascinated by why there aren't more girl gamers, but what we actually want to know is how we can get one. So I called the Frag Dolls (fragdolls-club.lup.com) to ask Katscratch (CGW's featured blogger in our January 2004 issue) out on a fantasy date.

Ubisoft's team of sexy killers.

CALL SIGN: **Katscratch**
SPECIALTY: **Controller Kung Fu**
FAVORITE PC GAMES: ***Half-Life 2, Far Cry, World of WarCraft, KOTOR, Chessmaster, Second Life***

ACTIVITY ONE: **GRAND THEFT MY HEART**

Buy an enormous HDTV with killer home theater sound and a monster PC. You should be spending all your money on women and electronics anyway, so if you're dating a gamer girl, this is a good way to kill two birds with one stone.

First off, don't insult your gamer-girl date by assuming she'll want to play *The Sims* or *Puzzle Princess Unicorn Pop*. Kat wanted our date to start with *Grand Theft Auto*, and we found that diving out of a stolen car to stomp a hooker into a puddle brings together all genders and races. Maybe *GTA* isn't the most romantic activity, but until they make videogames about sharing true love that aren't totally lame, it'll do.

ACTIVITY TWO: **SHOOT TO KILL**

A loose cannon on the edge of the law who plays by her own rules—and then breaks them!

Women are delicate flowers and should be treated as such. So take her shooting and get a .44 Magnum. There's a reason Dirty Harry shoots this gun. It has about 300 times more Magnum force than you need to explode a man, and even if you miss your target, you'll still kick so much total ass.

ACTIVITY THREE: **CARTOONY SUSHI**

This Dream Date thing was coming together pretty well thanks to the combination of Kat being awesome and me liking things that are awesome.

Some women don't actually consider it a date unless you feed them, so be sure to do it, even if they insist on going home to play *World of WarCraft*.

For dinner, Kat chose a trendy sushi bar with subdued, tasteful Japanese décor—a screaming Ultraman doing ninja kicks over the chef's head. It's as authentic as an American restaurant in Japan in which servers are dressed up as cowboy cheeseburgers. So, how'd it go? When I asked for permission to describe what happened the rest of the night, Katscratch replied: "I can't believe you just asked me that!" She'll call me back. I hope.

Seanbaby

Want to know more about the date? Go to www.seanbaby.com. He's probably still bragging about it.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE BROWN, BRUCEBROWN.COM

NEWS FEED One of the worst games ever made, *Postal 2*, continues making friends the world over: Retailers selling the game in Australia can be fined $14,000 U.S. or imprisoned for a year. Trust us, people, the game ain't worth all the effort.

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CHAT ROOM INTERVIEW

The AIM Game

GasPoweredChris : CGW Instant Message

File Edit Insert People

CGW: Well, that was great. Chris Taylor, creative director of Gas Powered Games and the guy behind *Dungeon Siege II*, just crashed my computer.

GasPoweredChris has entered the room

CGW: Hey, thanks for screwing up my computer, buddy.

GasPoweredChris: Sorry. I guess your machine couldn't handle my video stream. Hardly anyone can.

CGW: Maybe it was just a sign from above: "No pantsless video chats."

CGW: Anyhow...let's talk all things *Dungeon*.

GasPoweredChris: Sure, let's. Minus the S&M connotations, that is.

CGW: OK. So first, let me ask what you guys have been thinking since the original *DS*. What did you like? What didn't you dig?

GasPoweredChris: We focused really heavily on creating the best tools and technology for an RPG. In hindsight, we went a little overboard.

CGW: Well, I'm not complaining. We still use *DS* as a benchmark for testing PCs at *CGW*.

GasPoweredChris: Lots of stuff in *DS1* worked. We fell short in the storytelling department, and from every indication, the combat was too automated. I brought an RTS "spin" to the genre, and we found that players really like more complexity and interaction.

GasPoweredChris: I have not traditionally paid much attention to storytelling, but I've done a complete 180. Players want a great story; that's what I'm hoping we can give 'em. We've gone through four plot rewrites with professional writers.

CGW: Nice.

GasPoweredChris: Seriously--I think the key is the story and to make sure it's as moddable or even more so. There are some interesting ideas that we have, but we can't really talk about them right now.

CGW: Got it. But you're refining combat? How is it different?

GasPoweredChris: Combat is much more involved, with more choices. But we also don't want to alienate the players who liked the way it worked in the first game. We've rebuilt the combat and A.I. system and have also replaced the scripting system entirely.

CGW: How is combat going to feel less "automated" than it did in *DS1*?

GasPoweredChris: We have pushed more control back to the player, and as a result, it's much more engaging and interactive. We have learned a lot about where to strike the balance. Basically, we don't want the player to wear their mouse buttons out, but we also don't want them sitting back feeling like they aren't engaged, so it's a fine line between two extremes, and we feel we are much closer to it.

CGW: How else are you tweaking the experience for people who didn't totally dig it the first time around?

GasPoweredChris: Well, we added a skill tree to each class, and then on top of that, we have added powers that unlock as skills develop. So when the player is engaged in combat, they not only make the moment-to-moment choices about who to fight next, they also decide when to unload a huge power.

CGW: How do skill trees work?

GasPoweredChris: OK, here we go...: Start using a melee weapon. It generates experience that is applied to that class. Meanwhile, you earn a skill point. Check out the skill tree, and the first skill might require a certain amount of experience in melee before you can apply the point. This means that you could earn skill points in one class and apply them to another. It gives the player flexibility.

GasPoweredChris: Our designs revolve around giving players lots of choices...and between the four class breakdowns, I think that there are close to 80 skills (including the special powers).

CGW: The first game, as you said earlier, had a big focus on the technology. What's happening with the engine for the sequel? Is that getting a major overhaul?

GasPoweredChris: We have made a huge number of changes to the engine. As much as people think we are using the same engine as [the one in] *DS1*, that's not entirely accurate. We have completely replaced the special-effects system and, as part of that, now fully support 2.0 shaders. And then there is the look of the world, which has been taken to the next level with higher-resolution textures, models, animations, and overall detail. It's crazy how far we are pushing it.

CGW: I know that you're a huge WWII buff. Does that mean the inevitable revisiting of famous battles is coming?

GasPoweredChris: You are right to guess that, and one day, I *would* like to do a WWII RTS, but with the huge gamut of WWII games hitting the market, it would just be weird to jump into that fray.

CGW: Yep. Makes total sense. Cough! Cough! *Total Annihilation 2*!

GasPoweredChris: No comment

CGW: Fair enough. Actually, you know what? I feel bad that I'm holdin' you up, since you're juggling work and your kid.

GasPoweredChris: Hey, it was fun. So, um, I just hang this thing up now, eh? Seems rude. I'm a face-to-face kind of guy. I like to end with a handshake, a hug, a kiss, a little pillow talk, maybe?

CGW: Um, maybe some other time, Chris. [Awkward silence]

GasPoweredChris signed off at 11:53:19 AM.

CGW: Ha, ha, ha!

Strangely enough, this is the "G-rated" conversation with game-developer great Chris Taylor. Want to see what else he had to say about the upcoming *Dungeon Siege* sequel--and more? You've gotta hit the Web and go to aimgame.1up.com.

NEWS FEED ▸▸ **Black watch plaid! Not content with the job that the ESRB is doing, PSVratings is color-coding all games based on profanity, violence, and sex in order to help parents focus their children's future vices. Check out currentattractions.com for the latest.**

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There's been a mandate from the people! We need to defend our borders at all costs. Problem is, we're not willing to spend more than $35 on our little "Star Wars" system. This motion-detecting, foam-disc-hurling turret keeps unwanted editors away from us at all times. If only Robert would take the hint....

DVD

The Marx Brothers Silver Screen Collection

$41, WWW.AMAZON.COM

The classic comedy troupe made some of the funniest movies ever committed to celluloid. Here we are at the dawn of the new millennium, and we still can't find anything funnier than *Animal Crackers*, *Monkey Business*, *Horse Feathers*, *The Cocoanuts*, and *Duck Soup*. They are all in this box set and worth every dime.

PULP

Catwoman: When In Rome

$3.50, WWW.DCCOMICS.COM

They make a crap movie with Halle Berry but do nothing with this great comic? Sacrilege. Packed with excellent scripting and great artwork, this tale of Catwoman traveling to Rome is a must-read for thriller fans. A trade paperback collecting the series is undoubtedly on the way but grab this for a head start.

DVD

Napoleon Dynamite

$21, WWW.AMAZON.COM

If there was ever a guy born for a role, it's Jon Heder. As Napoleon, he's the most misunderstood nerd who ever walked upright. Five minutes into the movie, you're either squirming or sympathizing with this guy as he talks about learning to use a bo staff and shooting wolverines with a 12 gauge over summer break. Definitely quirky and definitely worth watching, if you haven't already.

MUSIC

"Vertigo," U2

$1, WWW.ITUNES.COM

Uno, dos, tres, quatorze! We cannot get this song out of our heads. U2's new CD, *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, is out. The band has another hit on its hands with this disc, which is laced with stellar sonic riffs. Those not satisfied with a mere CD can buy the DVD version or a super-pimp-daddy deluxe version with the DVD and a book. But all you cheap-asses out there can settle for one good song on iTunes.

JUKEBOX

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GAMES OF THE YEAR

The official nominees for 2004

Looking back, 2004 was a great year for PC gaming. But only a select few get to walk away with bragging rights as our choice games of the year. Who will win? *Half-Life 2*? *World of WarCraft*? Can't you just feel the tension? Not all the lists are final as we get down to the wire, so stay tuned next month as the *CGW* judicial branch sharpens sticks to decide who will get top honors.

ACTION
- Scrapland
- Sid Meier's Pirates!
- Thief: Deadly Shadows
- Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow
- Prince of Persia: Warrior Within

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER (SINGLE PLAYER)
- Painkiller
- Doom 3
- Half-Life 2
- Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault

FIRST PERSON SHOOTER (MULTIPLAYER)
- Unreal Tournament 2004
- Joint Ops
- Battlefield Vietnam

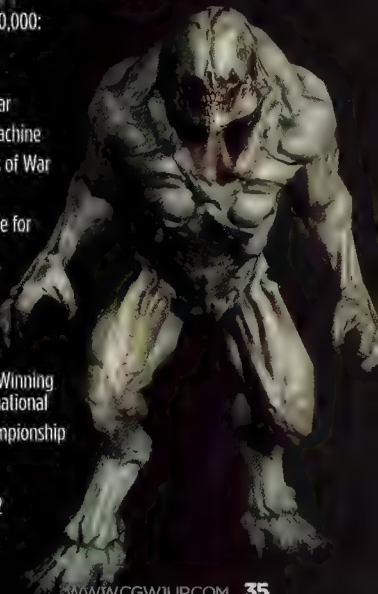
STRATEGY
- Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War
- Silent Storm
- Rome: Total War
- The Political Machine
- Kohan II: Kings of War
- The Sims 2
- LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth

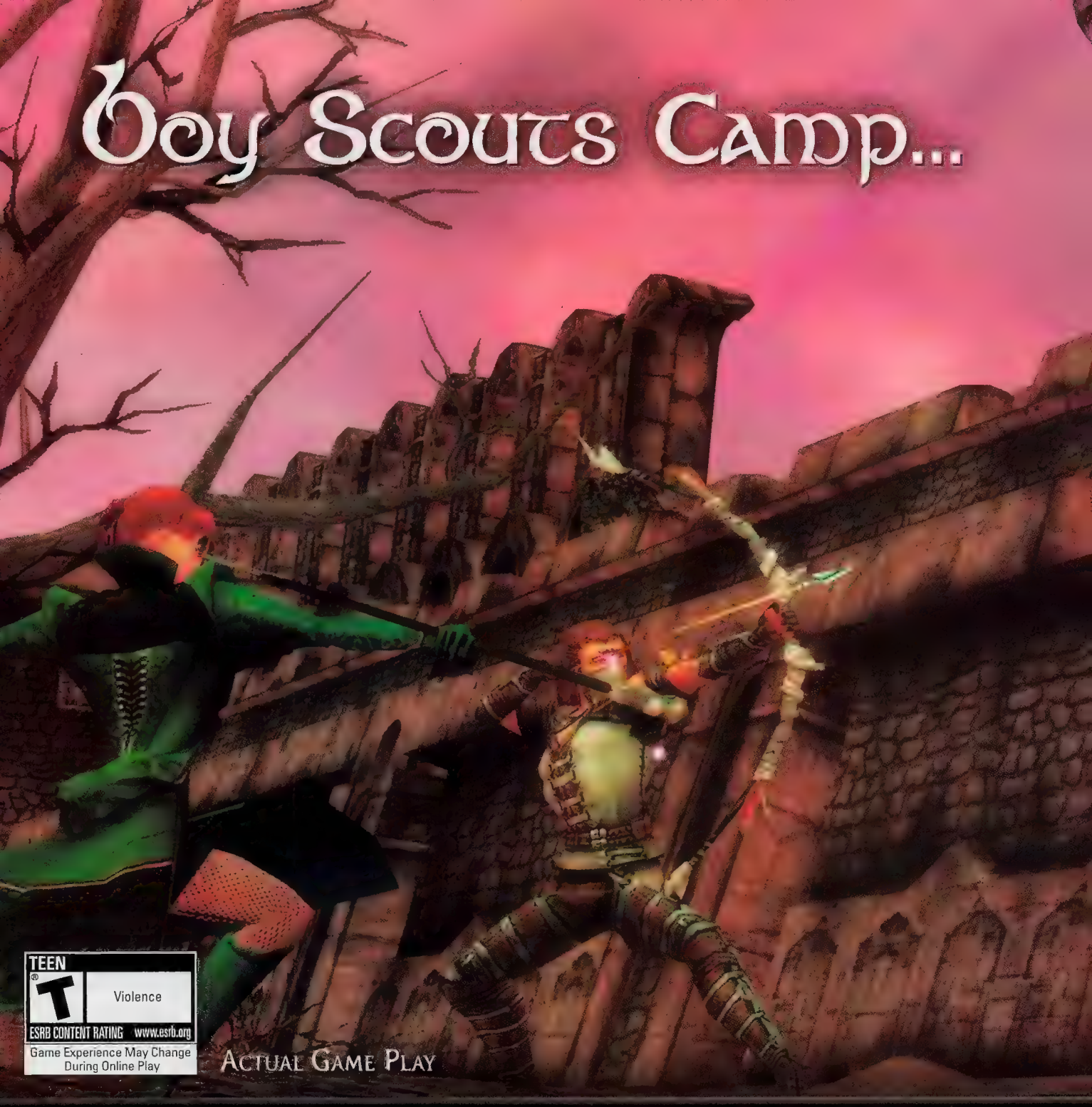
SPORTS
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005
- World Soccer: Winning Eleven 7 International
- Title Bout Championship Boxing
- Tony Hawk's Underground 2

MMORPG
- City of Heroes
- World of WarCraft
- EverQuest II

ADVENTURE
- Myst IV: Revelations
- Missing: Since January
- Wanted: A Wild Western Adventure
- Dark Fall II: Lights Out
- Secret of the Silver Earring

EXPANSION
- Call of Duty: United Offensive
- Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots
- Civilization III: Conquests
- Black Hawk Down: Team Saber
- Vietcong: Purple Haze
- Joint Ops: Typhoon Rising





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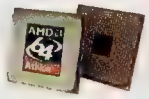

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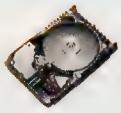

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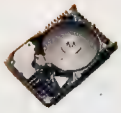

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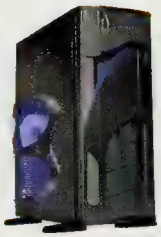

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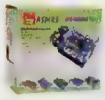

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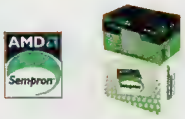

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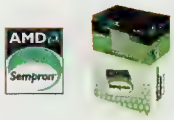

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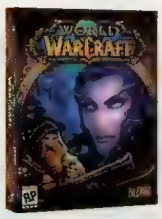

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Previews

Careful—that bear isn't too conducive to brain eating. Some of the cops never make it past the rotting hand on his head.

Inside

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We take an exclusive hands-on look at Gas Powered Games' RPG sequel.

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Master thief Anya Romanov ratchets the tension level up a few notches in this new stealth-action game.

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Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich
Superheroes vs. Nazis...you can never go wrong with that.

Publisher Aspyr Developer Wideload Games Action Out Summer 2005

Stubbs the Zombie

Monster mash

For every *Beyond Good & Evil*, for every *Grim Fandango*, for every *Psychonauts* or *Katamari Damacy*, it seems there are 10 *Quakes* and *Grand Theft Autos*. It's rare to see developers take wild, creative leaps in game design; quirky games can be risky for developers, and many in this industry are content to drape themselves in the security blanket of their guaranteed hits. But Alex Seropian, founder of Bungie Software and current Wideload Games head honcho, is all about the unique—and his upcoming comedy/horror adventure, *Stubbs the Zombie*, is anything but ordinary.

Stubbs takes place in a sort of 1950s pseudofuturistic cityscape called Punchbowl City, which is actually some rich entrepreneur's idea of what the future might look like. As it turns out, Punchbowl has been built on the grave of a traveling salesman named Stubbs, who awakens from his eternal slumber none too happy about this sudden turn of events. Now he's back from the dead and ready to turn Punchbowl upside down—and munch on a few brains in the process. Think of it as a sort of *Night of the Living Dead* meets *Back to the Future II*, complete with robots, flying cars, and all the blood 'n' guts you'd expect from a good zombie tale.

ZOMBIES EVOLVED

In another interesting turn, *Stubbs* utilizes the game engine that Seropian's former company is best known for: the *Halo* engine. But it takes more than just a solid interface to fuel a unique game. "After all, standard zombie lore does not give you your typical shooter character," Seropian laughs. And *Stubbs* isn't your typical shooter: You'll control the titular zombie from a third-person perspective, attacking the unwary Punchbowl citizenry and turning them into mindless undead. Your zombiefied subjects act on their own and thoughtfully volunteer their services as meat shields when the going gets tough. They can also make their own undead—expect to have anywhere from five to 20 brain-eaters in tow at any given time.

Stubbs has plenty of other tricks up his rotting sleeves, too. Disemboweled organs become explosive projectiles in his hands, and he's also got an attack described to us as "unholy flatulence." In one amusing sequence, you'll control Stubbs' disembodied hand while he is detained in a research facility. The hand skitters along the floor like something out of an *Evil Dead* movie, looking for a warm body. Once it is attached to a host's head, you can attack and kill people with the possessed character—there's even a stealth element here, as you can run and hide from people who notice the commotion.

B MOVIE

Keeping in tune with the low-budget horror films that inspired it, *Stubbs* also has an interesting visual quality. The game uses a sort of "grain" filter, making it look and feel more like a classic zombie flick. And when you control Stubbs' severed hand, the filter becomes slightly blurry to signal your out-of-body experience.

Stubbs the Zombie promises to be an offbeat, darkly humorous adventure with a proven engine, nonlinear gameplay, and interactive environments—we're even told to expect some vehicular action. Hang on to your heads and stay tuned to our next Radar section, where we will have an exclusive interview with Alex Seropian about all things *Stubbs*. ■ Ryan Scott

The Word: BRAAAAINS

"I haven't seen brain eating in 20 years!" —Hapless Punchbowl citizen

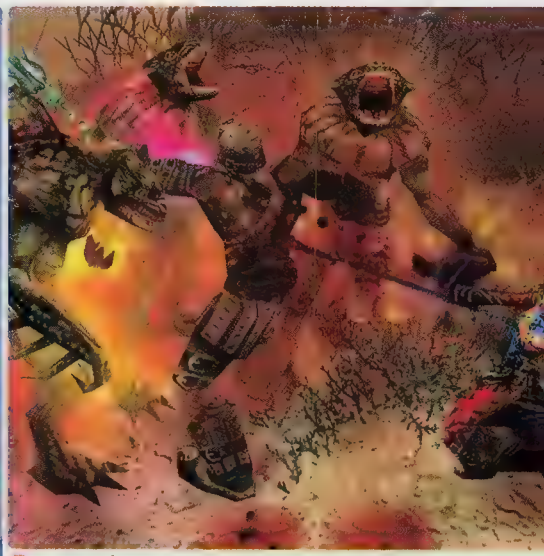
The world is vast and diverse, with environments ranging from lush forests to snow-capped mountains.

Something tells us we really don't want to piss off those giant faces. *DS2* introduces a host of unique powers for each of the four character classes.

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Gas Powered Games** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **Q1 2005**

Dungeon Siege II

An exclusive, hands-on tour of the new dungeon



Groups of monsters will often try to protect their leader by surrounding him.

Ask most PC gamers what they thought of the original *Dungeon Siege* and chances are you'll elicit mixed reactions. While fun, the game suffers from an uninspired story and a heavy-handed engine, which resulted in players spending far too much time watching the game play itself. But that's all about to change with *Dungeon Siege II*, which will address most of these criticisms and provide players with a lengthy new RPG experience. We recently had a chance to take sword in hand and do a bit of in-game questing—here are the five things we were most impressed with.

1 The game engine is smoother than ever before. The mapping system has been greatly improved, and you'll never wonder where you need to go next, thanks to a handy compass that points you toward your next objective. If you're a graphics nut, you'll also be pleased to know that the special-effects system has been redone—which means lots of eye candy to help immerse you in the single-player story.

2 Plot wasn't that high on *DS1*'s priority list, but lead designer Chris Taylor promises a deep and engaging narrative for the sequel. "We've learned that people love a rich world," says Taylor. "We focused more on developing the technology in *DS1*, but now with *DS2*, we can really concentrate on the game." The core story—which Taylor is currently very tight-lipped about—comprises an estimated 30 hours of gameplay...and that doesn't take any of the optional side quests into account. *DS2* is littered with hidden missions and areas to reward exploration-minded players; there's also a comprehensive quest journal to keep track of what you're doing, where you've been, and even what you've fought.

3 All the *DS1* haters among you can breathe easy: Combat is now far less autonomous. "*DS1* was our attempt at giving players a game that was pure fun and not tedious," says Taylor. "We realized later that players actually want to have more to do." To this end, a brand-new powers system has been implemented into *DS2*. Characters can learn a variety of unique skills, such as the ability to dual-wield weapons, throw fireballs, or animate fallen corpses that join your party in combat. You'll need all the help you can get, too—monsters are much craftier this time around, using group tactics, formations, and *EverQuest*-style aggro behavior to even the odds.

Combat is now far less autonomous than it was in *DS1*.

4 Kiss the pack mule good-bye—*DS2* features a host of new pets which can be raised from cutesy baby versions to fearsome combat machines. Your pets' stats are affected by what you feed them, which makes for a ready solution when you're overloaded with loot. For instance, feeding your ice elemental a certain diet of items will transform him into a frost-flinging behemoth, complete with a cool enemy-stopping frost aura power. And if you're partial to the pack mule, we've got good news: The more he eats, the more treasure he can carry.

5 You'll get consistently better loot as you progress deeper into the game—and with some of the new interface tweaks, it's now easier to gauge an item's overall effect on your stats. Not only are there over 200 unique items to be found, but you can also use various reagents to enchant them, giving them an even bigger bite in battle. On top of that, there are 100 new set pieces: The more pieces you're wearing, the stronger the set is. Not only will you be getting medieval, but you'll look good doing it.

Ryan Scott

The World DEEPER

PUBLISHER: **Hip Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Blue 52** GENRE: **Stealth-Action**
RELEASE DATE: **April 2005**

Stolen

Cat suit not included

Look out, Sam Fisher and Solid Snake—there's a new girl in town. And Anya Romanov, the sexy, leather-clad heroine of Hip Interactive's upcoming stealth-action game *Stolen,* is here to steal more than just hearts. She's an athletic, fleet-footed cat burglar who loves nothing better than a good challenge.

Stolen is set in an alternate-reality metropolis called Forge City, which is in the midst of a huge election. Anya's larcenous escapades start off simple, but what begins as a manageable museum break-in quickly transforms into a convoluted web of political intrigue and industrial espionage. Anya must rely on her stealth skills and spectacular gymnastic abilities as she makes her way through four separate levels, from the aforementioned museum to the corporate underbelly of Forge City.

THOSE WONDERFUL TOYS

Our slinky protagonist isn't the type to get her hands dirty; Anya has some pretty pitiful combat skills. Fortunately, though, she's quite the tech monkey—and she's got plenty of gadgets and gizmos on hand. Anya's Day-Glo blue shades feature a handy first-person HUD that can be used to highlight enemy targets, structural weaknesses, and hidden routes that might otherwise be missed in third-person mode. She's also armed with devices that can be used to lure guards from their posts or cripple security equipment, and a couple of different radars will help her evade incoming threats.

And evade these threats you will. Instead of skulking slowly through the shadows, you'll need to move quickly and constantly to slip past your enemies. Early on, guards are lazy saps who stick to their routines, quickly forgetting that they just saw a killer babe cartwheel past. Later on, they get tougher...much tougher.

If that doesn't get your pulse pounding, *Stolen* is also peppered with tension-filled minigames. Lock picking, computer hacking, and safecracking are a few of the timing-based challenges you'll face during your constant race to remain unseen. Think fast—and don't make a sound.

Nick Walkland

The Word: **HUSH**

Instead of skulking slowly through the shadows, you'll need to move quickly.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Submarine Simulation** RELEASE DATE: **February 2005**

Silent Hunter III

Once more into the deep

Ubisoft may soon become the industry leader in hardcore sims. It conquered the skies with its *IL-2* series, and now it's returning to the seas with the imminent release of *Silent Hunter III*.

SH3 is intended as a submarine simulation both realistic enough to satisfy hardcore fans and accessible enough for newbies. Ubisoft promises the usual highlights for sim aficionados: over 80 realistically modeled ships and planes, four playable *Kriegsmarine* subs with all their historical variants, and plenty of accurately rendered military hardware. To make the game palatable to the typical gamer, Ubisoft will also include scalable realism, sharp graphics, and even a bit of roleplaying.

Instead of just concentrating on the boat's hardware, *SH3* will also pay attention to the human factor.

WHAT'S YOUR NAME, SOLDIER?

Instead of just concentrating on the boat's hardware, *SH3* will also pay attention to the human factor. All crewmen have names, as well as morale and fatigue stats that affect their performance; officers will also have specialty skills that assist them in various tasks. Your crew must rest to maintain maximum efficiency, and as your mission progresses, morale will change depending on your successes and failures. You can even recommend medals for your crew to boost their morale. This emphasis on your crew should go a long way toward making them seem less like a collection of tools and more like real people. You'll see lookouts scanning the horizon for targets, sonar men poring over the ship's instruments, and bearded guys looking like extras from *Das Boot*.

The game includes a dynamic campaign that covers the entirety of WWII, along with many stand-alone scenarios and a built-in editor. If Ubisoft can deliver a good campaign, decent multiplayer options, and realistic enemy A.I., *Silent Hunter III* could be the sub game that hardcore sim fanatics have been longing for since *Aces of the Deep*. **Di Luo**

The Word **PING!**

PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
Act of War: Direct Action	Atari	March 2005
Advent Rising	Majesco	April 2005
Age of Empires III	Microsoft	2005
Asheron's Call: Throne of Destiny	Turbine Entertainment	Q2 2005
Auto Assault	NCsoft	TBA
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight Software	2005
The Bard's Tale	Vivendi Universal	2005
Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts	Q1 2005
The Battle of Britain	Ubisoft	Q1 2005
BioShock	TBA	2005
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	2005
Blitzkrieg II	CDV Software	Q2 2005
Brothers in Arms	Ubisoft	February 2005
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	February 2005
Call of Duty 2 (working title)	Activision	TBA
Carmageddon 4 (working title)	SCi	2005
City of Villains	NCsoft	2005
Civilization IV	Atari	2005
Commandos Strike Force	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	CDV Software	Q1 2005
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Activision	March 2005
Dragon Age	TBA	2005
Dragonshard	Atari	March 2005
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	Q1 2005
Dungeons & Dragons Online	Atari	Q4 2005
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	Bethesda Softworks	2005
Empire Earth II	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
F.E.A.R.	Vivendi Universal	2005
Fallout 3	Bethesda Softworks	TBA
FlatOut	Empire Interactive	Q1 2005
Freedom Fighters 2 (working title)	Eidos Interactive	Q4 2005
Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
Ghost Recon 2	Ubisoft	2005
Gothic II: The Night of the Raven	JoWood	TBA
Gothic III	JoWood	Q4 2005
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar Games	2005?
Guild Wars	NCsoft	February 2005
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
Imperator	Mythic Entertainment	2006
Imperial Glory	Eidos Interactive	March 2005
Jaws	Majesco	Q3 2005

New Update

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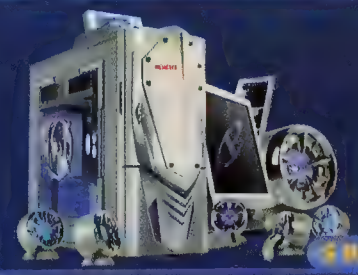

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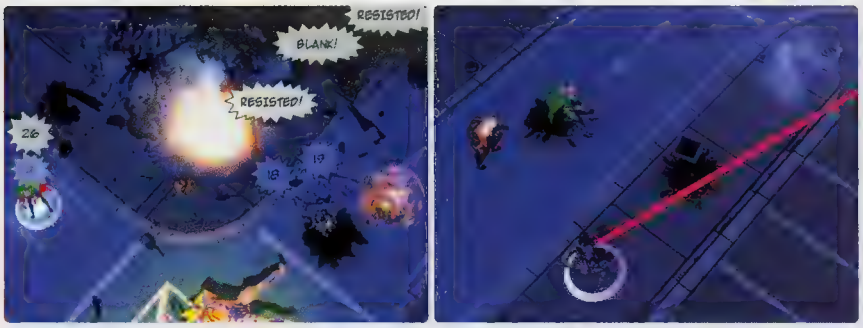
PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
King Kong	Ubisoft	Q4 2005
Lego Star Wars	Eidos Interactive	April 2005
The Matrix Online	Sega	January 2005
Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi Universal	February 2005
MotoGP 3	THQ	Q3 2005
The Movies	Activision	March 2005
NASCAR 2005	Electronic Arts	February 2005
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari	2006
Nexus: The Jupiter Incident	Vivendi Universal	February 2005
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	2006
Pariah	Groove Games	March 2005
Project: Snowblind	Eidos Interactive	February 2005
Psychonauts	Majesco	April 2005
Psychotoxic	Whiptail Interactive	March 2005
Quake IV	Activision	2005
Robots	Vivendi Universal	March 2005
The Roots	Cenega Publishing	February 2005
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ	May 2005
Sacred Underworld	Ascaron	Q1 2005
Scarface	Vivendi Universal	Q4 2005
Serious Sam 2	Global Star	TBA
Silent Hunter III	Ubisoft	February 2005
The Sims 2: University	Electronic Arts	March 2005
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	March 2005
Star Wars KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	LucasArts	February 2005
Star Wars Republic Commando	LucasArts	March 2005
Star Wars RTS	LucasArts	2005
Stolen	Hip Games	April 2005
Stronghold 2	Global Star	Q1 2005
Stubbs the Zombie	Aspyr	Q2 2005
Supreme Ruler 2010	Strategy First	February 2005
SWAT 4	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft	September 2005
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Vivendi Universal	TBA
The Settlers: Heritage of Kings	Ubisoft	February 2005
Tomb Raider VII (working title)	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
UFO: Aftershock	Cenega Publishing	Q3 2005
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	Microsoft	TBA
X2: The Return	Deep Silver	February 2005
Ys: The Ark of Napishtim	Konami	TBA

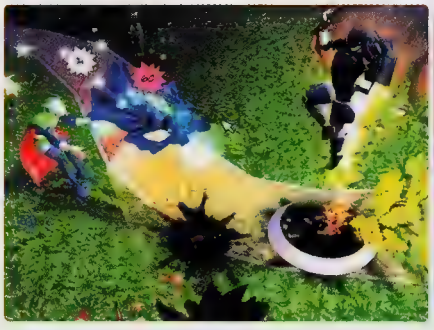
New Update

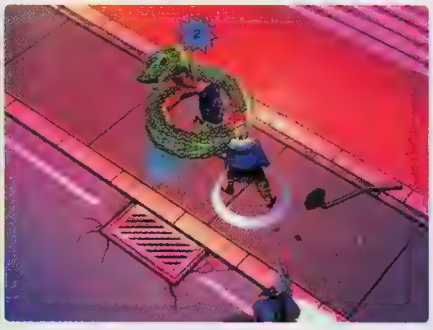


PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** DEVELOPER: **Irrational Games** GENRE: **Strategy-RPG** RELEASE: **Q1 2005**

Freedom Force vs The Third Reich

For freedom!





While many comic books save their big twists for page 22, Irrational pulls off a slick twist right from the start with *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich.* Instead of propelling the heroes into the more cosmic '70s era of comics (as the team said it would in early interviews), *FFV3R* actually mixes things up by slapping the '60s and the '40s together.

FFV3R doesn't play like a whole new story that promises to needlessly redefine the series canon like some comics are wont to do—instead, it's taking the formula that was so successful in the previous game and tweaking it to make it better.

Power levels and hero abilities are clearly labeled, so one can easily figure out whether a Sonic Boom is usable, and if not, how long it will take until it is. Buildings and objects are just as destructible as before, but there's less of a prestige penalty for property damage, which translates into more insurance-liable superhuman brawls.

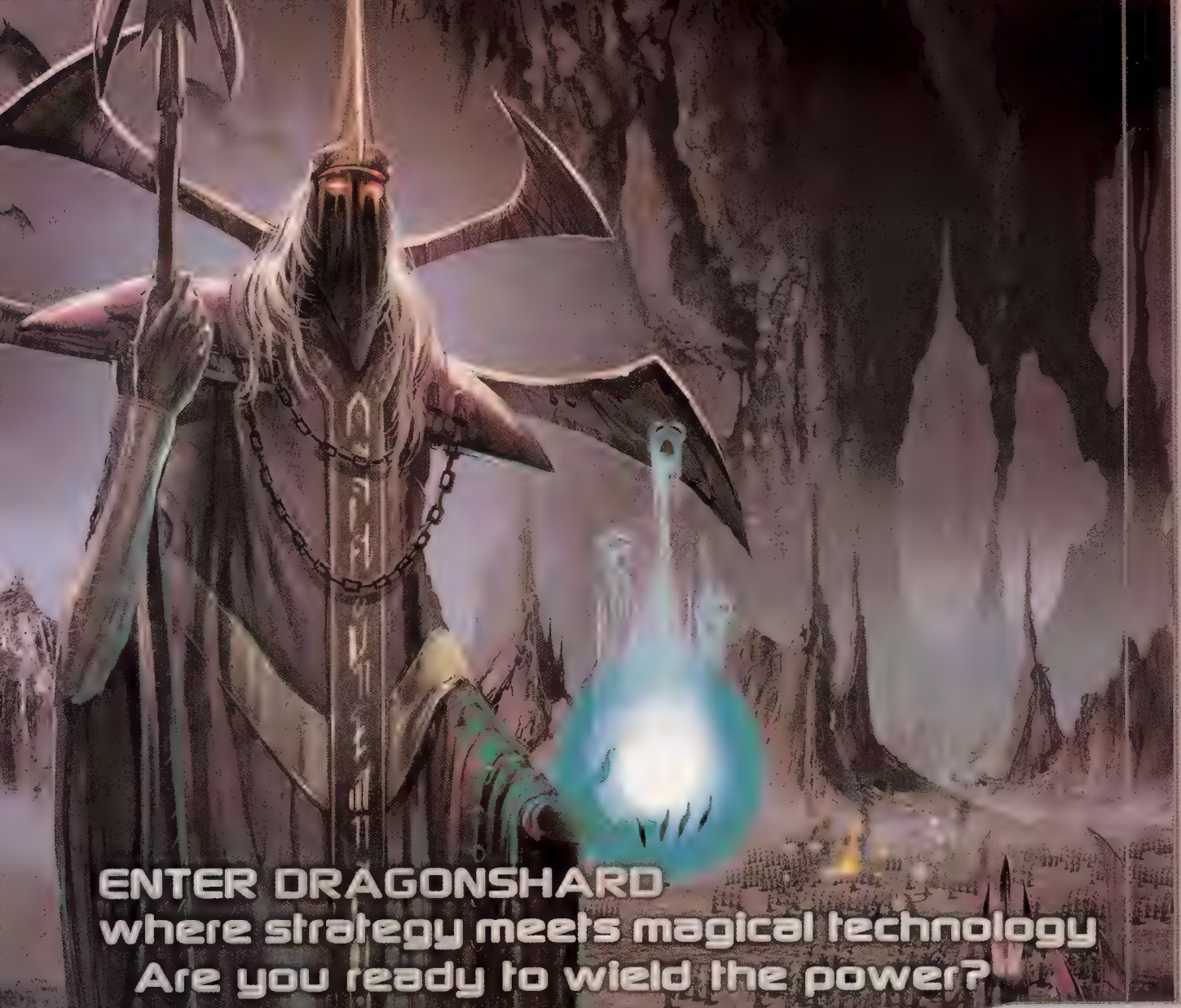
WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

In our hands-on sortie, the ever-so-melodramatic Mentor and the feisty El Diablo kept us on familiar ground; they're teamed up with *Shazam*-inspired Aztec hero Quetzalcoatl and the *Rocketeer*-esque Sky King. Not to be left out are enemies like the Kill-a-Rilla (a vicious Nazi experiment involving an ape's head on a man's body) and the Minor Eye of the Third Reich (a floating brain in a jar armed with tentacles and a retractable beam-shooting eye).

The mission we played is standard comic-book fare—you know, your typical "touch the temporal warp holes" stuff. There are some pretty stunning plot twists, though. Let's just say that in superhero team crossovers, it isn't unheard of for two enemies to wind up realizing that they should unite against a common foe. Fortunately, unlike with real comics, you won't have to wait six months for the full arc. **Thierry Nguyen**

The Word SUPER-DUPER

***Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich* actually mixes things up by slapping the '60s and the '40s together.**



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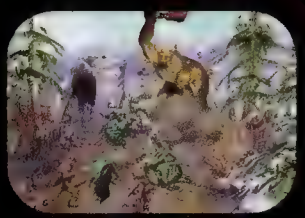

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DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

The best names you've never seen

FROM: **Zuxxez** AVAILABILITY: **Q1 2005**

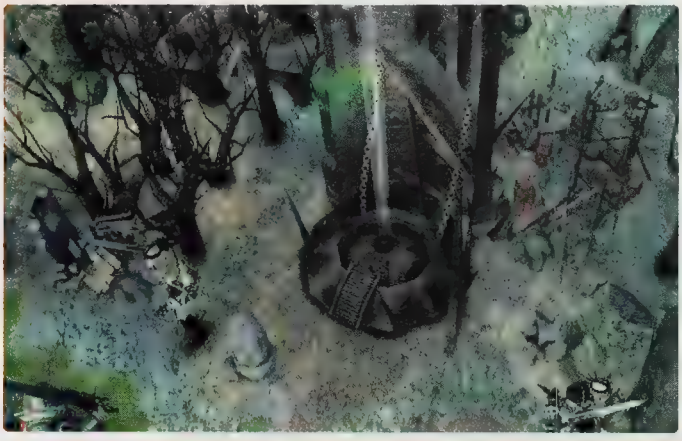
Earth 2160

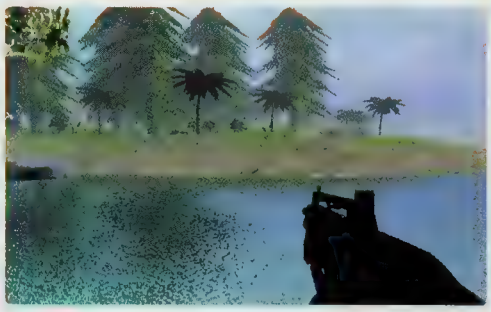
Word on the street: Missed *Earth 2140* and *2150*? So did most North Americans. Still, the third time's hopefully the charm for the popular German sci-fi RTS series. Four playable factions—Eurasian Dynasty, United Civilized States, Lunar Corporation, and Aliens—are now available, each sporting unique units, abilities, and technologies. Hire free agents for research and spycraft, build bases, and amass an arsenal crafted from modular parts before challenging up to seven additional aspiring dictators online. **Sounds kinda beat:** We trust you're familiar with the "three strikes" rule. And it's not like prior series installments set the world aflame...at least, not the real one. All have been solid yet underappreciated offerings. With the right marketing plan, a good distribution partner, and strong word of mouth behind it, *Earth 2160* could garner a bona fide cult following. Failing that, look on the bright side: It'll stand out in the bargain bin.

FROM: **Revoltage** AVAILABILITY: **2005**

Soul Quest

Word on the street: It's an ambitious turn-based strategy game in which might and magic dominate. Commanding wizards and warriors, players fight for dominion over fantasy realms while working to restore the peace among six separate races, including humans, elves, dwarves, and undead. A fully functioning economic model is fused with a robust spellcasting system and character-advancement engine, adding significant replay value. Chat up NPCs, collect hundreds of exotic items, or create custom-made maps with the included editor. How enchanting! **Sounds kinda beat:** Revoltage, a brand-new team from Poland, hasn't yet made a mark on the industry. And let's face it: Today, RPGs are all-consuming productions that cost more than a few gold pieces to make, rendering the genre an unlikely starting point. We're unaware if the crew actually comprehends the time and resource commitments such a project demands—but here's hoping so...its first effort looks promising.



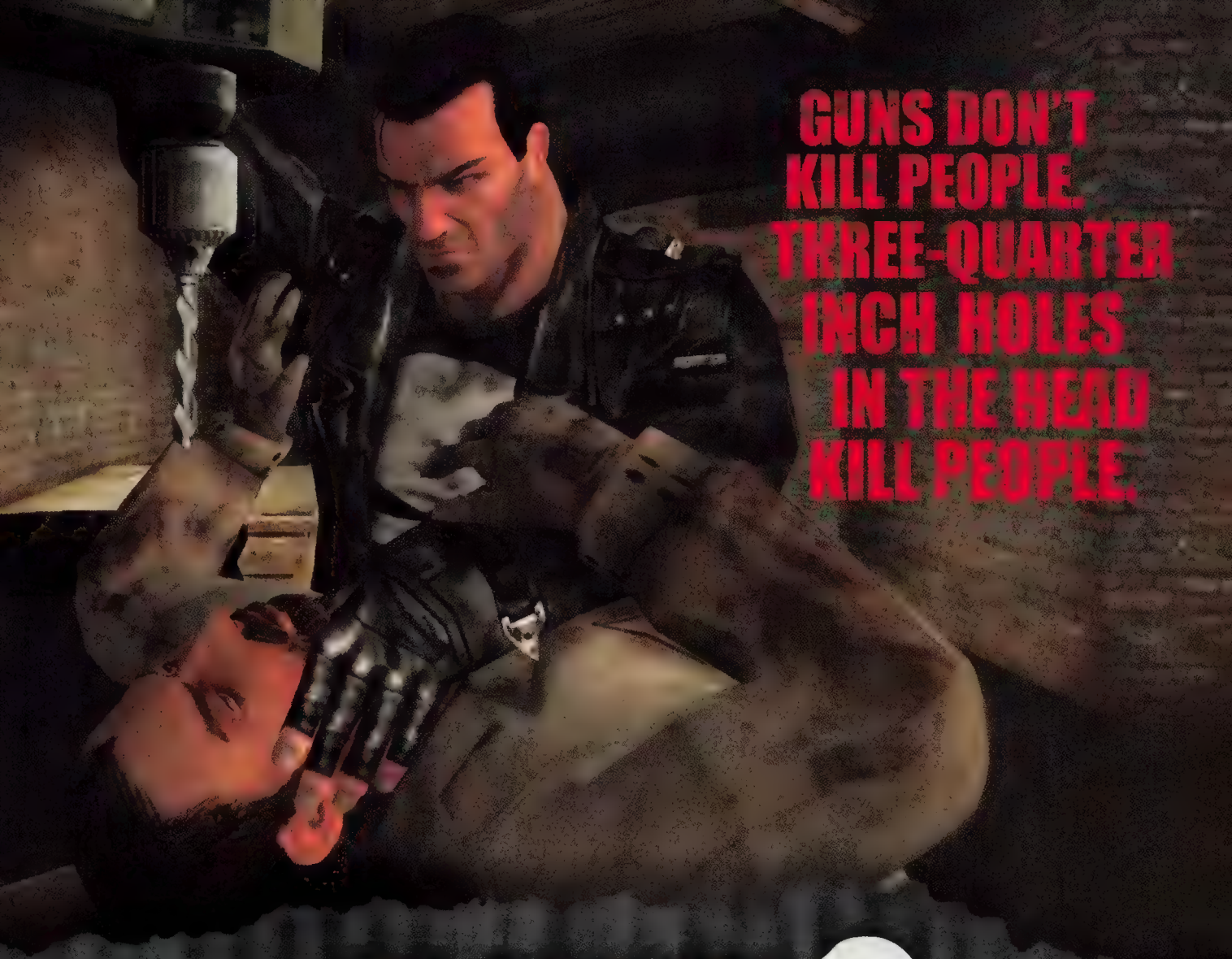


FROM: **Fy Software** AVAILABILITY: **Q2 2005**

Vatan

Word on the street: The year: 2273. The outlook: grim. As an iron-willed legionnaire, you'll take down the people's revolution, wielding a pistol and a sniper rifle from a first-person perspective. In dense jungles, futuristic cityscapes, and extraterrestrial space stations, gunmen flit between spacious indoor and outdoor environments, peppering insurgents with particle weapons. Realistic physics and immersive visuals instantly suck you in to the space-age conflict as battles rage across intergalactic locales. Stay frosty, soldier—and pray that your power armor holds. **Sounds kinda beat:** *Shades of Red Faction II*, anyone? Beyond simple plot redux, chew on this paradox as well: Fy Software is only six men strong. Hardly a reassuring fact, given the typical manpower required to put together a shooter. Regardless, the genre's best examples have come from garage collectives. Keep your trigger fingers crossed.

WRITTEN BY SCOTT STEINBERG



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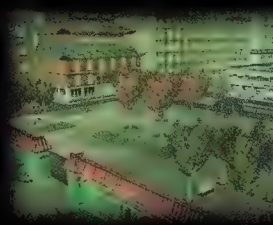
I know why, night after night,
you sit in front of your computer.

THE MATRIX IS ONLINE. JACK IN NOW.



The Matrix Online is the future of the Matrix, picking up right where the trilogy left off. The revolution is over, but within the Matrix a secret war still rages—a war of control between the Machines, the Exiles, and the people of Zion. Come join the continuing storyline of the Matrix where you decide who to oppose and what to believe. Only your courage and perseverance can protect the legacy of Neo's sacrifice. Jack in.

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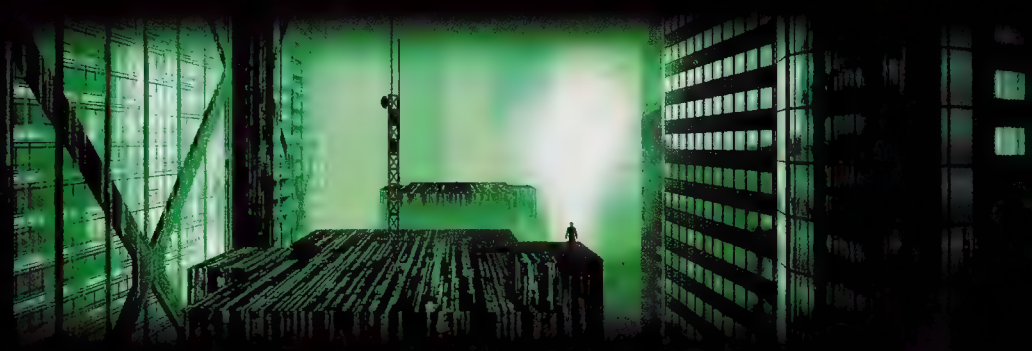


THE REDEMPTION OF ANAKIN—AND ALL *STAR WARS* GAMES—IS AT HAND

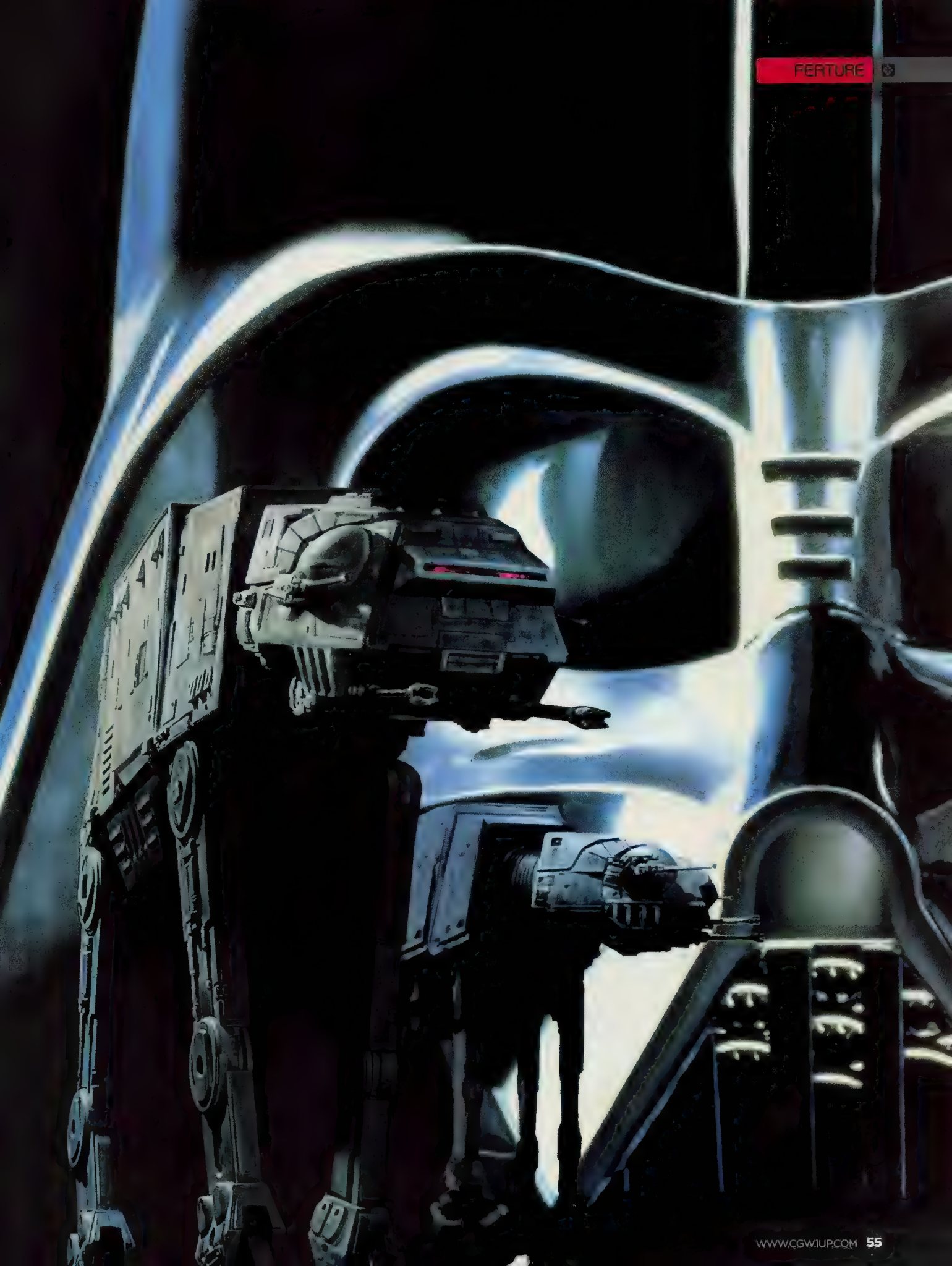
BACK IN BLACK

BY *CGW*'S IMPERIAL FORCES

At first, we were tempted by the dark side. You know, start this story with an obscure quote from the movies and then make a lame joke about the Force or Hayden Christensen. Maybe even brag that we've got yet another scoop that the competition wishes it could snag.

Before launching headlong into LucasArts' slick new attempt at an RTS game, *Star Wars: Empire at War* (working title), let's put these new titles in perspective for a moment. *Knights of the Old Republic* is the role-playing game to beat. *Battlefront* took a good shot at the *Battlefield* series. *SW Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed* has actually made the MMORPG playable. But it hasn't always been this good for a certain galaxy far, far away. There were the dark times, when many of the *Star Wars* titles were knockoffs of popular series or half-baked games that came out too soon. Some were good, but others were very, very bad.

Now a time of reckoning is at hand. We snuck into the heart of the LucasArts Death Star in San Raphael, CA, to reveal everything you want to know about the upcoming *Star Wars* games you need to play. What's the big deal about yet another *Star Wars* strategy game? Is *KOTOR II* as good as the original? What's it like playing *Star Wars Republic Commando*? How many poses can you put *Star Wars* Lego figures in? All these questions and more are about to be answered.



PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Petroglyph** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2005**

Star Wars: **Empire at War** (working title)

Something has been missing from the few *Star Wars* strategy games that have come out on the PC: the fun. OK, that's a little harsh, but there's no denying that these games have not let you feel like you're a part of the movies, a part of some massive interstellar civil war. That's about to change with *Star Wars: Empire at War.* Set in the period after the upcoming *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* film and just before *Episode IV: A New Hope*, the game will feature the battle for control of the galaxy. Star destroyers will burn in orbit. AT-ATs will crush Rebel forces on the ground below. And it will all happen at the same time, in a persistent universe.

This is the rise of the Rebellion.

IT'S A BIG GALAXY OUT THERE

The game, when done, will be huge. Your primary goal will be to conquer the 20-plus worlds in the galaxy. You start with a few planets under your control and work to expand your sphere of influence. It sounds simple enough—like stuff that's been done in strategy games countless times before—but instead of a rudimentary, linear campaign in which you wage one battle at a time to progress the story, *Empire at War*'s campaign is much more dynamic, with everything you do impacting the next battle. That's why we're excited.

Most of what we saw in a demo of the pre-alpha code focused on how the combat sequence works. So, the best way to dive into this is to take a quick walk through the chain of events that make up the flow of combat. On a large galaxy map, you see all the planets that you'll be fighting over. Besides the obvious additional income (which we'll get to later), there are specific secondary incentives to own a planet. One planet might give the ability to build a special attachment to bases, while another could allow for cheaper, faster ship construction. You'll need to determine which ones you want to absorb but be careful not to stretch those troops too thin. A fleet always needs to be ready to defend its turf.

STAR DESTROYERS WILL BURN IN ORBIT. AT-ATS WILL CRUSH REBEL FORCES BELOW. AND IT WILL ALL HAPPEN AT THE SAME TIME.

THE ART OF WAR

The Imperial forces are trying to make an all-out push to take over Tatooine. The Rebels are only able to muster a few X-wing squadrons on short notice. The objective: Take out as many of those transports as possible. Afterward, with one less transport, the ground war begins. Knocking out enough transports in orbit can turn the tide below, effectively stopping an assault.

RED FIVE, STANDING BY (SCREEN 1)

Let's say you want to take over Tatooine. Load up transports with all the AT-ATs you can cram onboard, send along some star destroyers, and then slaughter yourself some Rebel scum. The first trick is getting there. An asteroid belt surrounds the planet, making it tough for large ships to get to it; plus, you can't see what's beyond the belt.

TIE fighters are nimble enough to navigate the field, but larger ships will get pelted with rocks and take some damage. On the other side, a contingent of X-wings lies in wait. Crap! These guys are good at taking down transports

3

Tosti gave an example of one strategy that ran through his head during the demo: "I may start a battle that I'd lose. Why? Because it's strategically advantageous for me to slow down the ground assault. In the meantime, as I keep the Empire fixated on my planet, I can sneak over and take an unprotected world."

1

2

and capital ships at close range! Every transport that gets destroyed is one less piece of equipment for the ground war. "To keep the space battles manageable, combat is done on a 2D plane," says producer Brett Tosti. But, he assures, the engine allows ships to weave around each other, making for some incredible-looking aerial duels. And, like the asteroid belt, other interstellar phenomena will also affect combat. An ion storm, for example, could cripple a ship's shields or ability to fire lasers. Basically, think of the game as a much better done *Star Trek: Armada* rather than *Homeworld*.

ALLLLLMOST THERE... (SCREENS 2 & 3)
The space battle can resolve itself in a couple of ways. The Rebels could repel the attack and hold the planet, but they might still be pummeled by another wave of invaders. If the Empire breaks through, it's another story. If the Rebels stop enough troop transports, you've got to wait for reinforcements to show up. In the meantime, blockade the planet to cut off any income that it generates for the enemy.

4

5

STAY ON TARGET (SCREENS 4 & 5)
When the ground war begins, all the main resources that were on the transports finally come into play, and that is all you've got to rely upon for the battle—at least until you control the planet yourself. When the dust settles, you're either still holding the fort and waiting for the cavalry to arrive, or there's a new sheriff in town and you need to brace yourself for a counterattack. You see, the battle is never really over. Any surviving troops are what you're left with for upcoming battles until you get reinforcements.

Sure, survivors will get experience. There's also going to be a couple hero units along the way to help out. Darth Vader will be there to fight alongside you and cut a bloody swath through Rebels, but passive characters, such as Mon Mothma, are better at increasing your income.

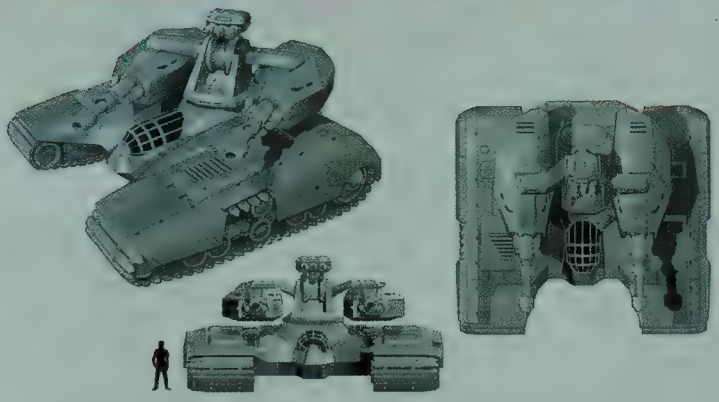
NOT AN AGE OF STAR WARS EMPIRES

Here's what *Empire at War* is not doing: excessive resource management. "Nobody wants to see a droid chopping down trees to build a base," laughs Tosti. "In most RTS games out right now, you spend 80 percent of your time gathering resources to build up some megaforce. You battle this megaforce, and the outcome is simply determined by sheer numbers and how quickly you gathered rocks and lumber."

Not here. Income is handled simply by owning planets. Bigger planets, ones with more natural resources, ones that are industrialized—each planet brings something unique to the table (as mentioned earlier) and a steady income. Besides the combat, this is what excites Tosti the most: "I'm more of a tactician. I want to make those hard decisions on the battlefield, not sweat about idle laborers."

As far as base building goes, a majority of that will revolve around additions (which will be hard points) to bases. Cantinas to draft new recruits, medical centers, construction facilities, ion cannons—each of these additions will be grafted directly onto ground and space bases. More additions mean the level of the actual base increases. In a space battle, for example, if enough parts of your beefy level 5 space station get torn asunder, your station is demoted to level 3. Translation: It's less powerful and in dire need of repairs.

Technically, it feels like two RTS games in one.



"ENGAGE THOSE STAR DESTROYERS AT POINT-BLANK RANGE!"

How do you add complexity to battles without actually making them more complex? On larger targets, add multiple hard points to attack. Take this star destroyer, for example. You can simply click on the ship and your forces will attack the shields, then the hull. But what if you just want to target turrets, take down the shield generator, demolish a TIE fighter launch bay, or cripple the engines? Now you can. Hard points that help you cripple the enemy will also be on space stations and land-based buildings, making them less powerful.

3

Use the blocks

Lego Star Wars isn't kids' stuff

Squat and cute but still able to kick butt. That, in essence, sums up Eidos' newest project. Using Lego characters you can re-create the action of *Star Wars: Episodes I–III*. Sound goofy? We thought so, too—until we saw it. Then, in a moment of inspiration, we built a couple Lego kits for ourselves.

Awww...ain't that cute....look at his widdle wightsaber.

Even this Lego version of a spaceship can make the Kessel Run in under 12 parsecs.

1 Rebecca spent two whole days assembling this 646-piece monstrosity! Looks cool, though.

2 Slightly less menacing at 1 inch tall, but he still has that deep voice. Go figure.

PETRO-WHO?

Petroglyph (Pet-ro-glif) noun – (1) An inscription or carving in rock. (2) A newly formed game-development house consisting of former Westwood Studios people who refused to leave Sin City. Joe Bostic, the brainiac behind *Dune II* and the *Command & Conquer* series, is leading this new project. ("Even down to the HR person, a lot of the old [Westwood] gang is back together," says lead programmer Mike Legg.) These guys are creating a brand-new engine that's more potent than the *C&C Generals* engine to take interstellar war to new heights. That is one of the cool things about using a new engine as opposed to the usual tactic of using an older game and trying to shoehorn in new gameplay. (*Cough* *Galactic Battlegrounds*! *Cough*)

Episode III Spoilers

Kind of like with *Titanic,* we already know how *Star Wars: Episode III* is going to end. We still want to see it, though. Hell, *CGW*'s offices will be closed the day the movie opens. As we're all waiting for May to come, our spy network reports back with some of the latest information about what will be in *Revenge of the Sith.*

- We'll find out why all the Jedi disappeared.
- Who has been hiding Kamino from the Jedi and who ordered the clone army will be revealed.
- The last 10 minutes, apparently, kick serious butt. It'll be a bit of a cliff-hanger, in the usual *Star Wars* fashion. But since you know what happens from there on out, it'll tug at the heartstrings. As long as there are no Gungans present, we're cool.
- We will not see any Jedi spirits, as we did in the original movies, but it will be explained why some Jedi have the ability to appear as spirits and others do not.
- There are almost two decades between *III* and *IV* when the bulk of the Jedi hunting happens, so you won't see hundreds of Jedi get wiped out onscreen. But you do see what starts this chain of events.
- *Episode III* won't detail how many Jedi are left. If there's any spin-off material (comics, books, games—whatever), that could determine it.
- "George was only talking about C-3PO being the droid that had his memory erased, if *my* memory serves me correctly," says one insider.
- Senator/Emperor Palpatine will not know about Luke and Leia at the end of *Episode III.*

IF IT'S BROKE, FIX IT

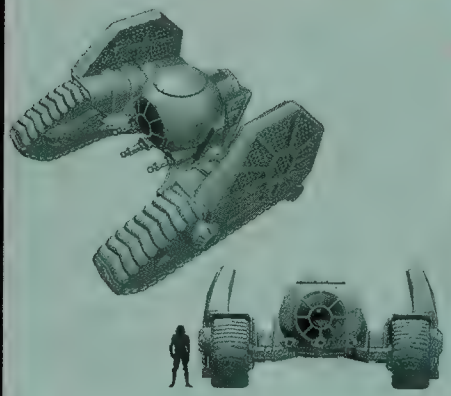
Empire at War is also not going to have clueless pathfinding like we saw in *Force Commander.* "One big problem with [*Force Commander*]—and lots of RTS games for that matter—has been a proper lack of formations," says Tosti. If you grouped AT-ATs with AT-STs and ground troops, each would move at its own pace. Kind of defeats the whole point of grouping forces, doesn't it? Now, troops grouped together stick together. You're only as fast as your slowest unit, and they all watch each other's proverbial backs. EA Games' *Battle for Middle-earth* does this as well, but Tosti promises that this will be on a whole other level.

There's still more that needs hashing out, like a neutral third party that will impede the rapid growth of both sides in the single-player campaign. It's all still very tentative, but here's a hypothetical situation we posed to the team: In order to take control of neutral worlds early on, you'll need to sweep away any opposition forces, such as Imperial sympathizers, if you're playing as the Rebels. Tosti assures us that something is being worked on, but even LucasArts and Petroglyph haven't finalized how they want it done yet.

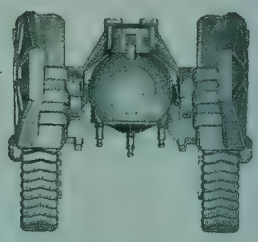
Obviously, you can't just plug something this big into an existing game engine. You need to create one from scratch, and it'd better be good. That's why LucasArts was anxious to work with Petroglyph (see sidebar, page 59). "Who," you ask? These are former Westwood Studios employees, the guys who created the *Command & Conquer* series. The engine they assembled for *C&C: Generals* is still being used by Electronic Arts (most recently for *Battle for Middle-earth*). As you can see from the screenshots, even this early on, it looks awesome.

Empire at War already has the markings of a game that rethinks how the RTS game is played. But a lot needs to be done in the 10 months before it's ready for store shelves. Should LucasArts and Petroglyph be proud of this technological terror that they're creating? Yes, now please cue that Darth Vader "Imperial March" music.

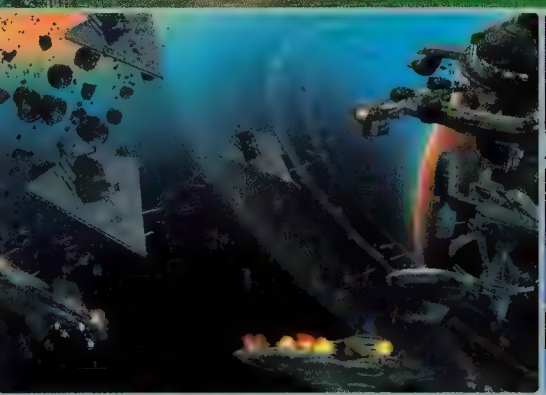
The Rebel armada is double-parked in orbit due to alternate side of the planet parking on Tuesdays and Thursdays.



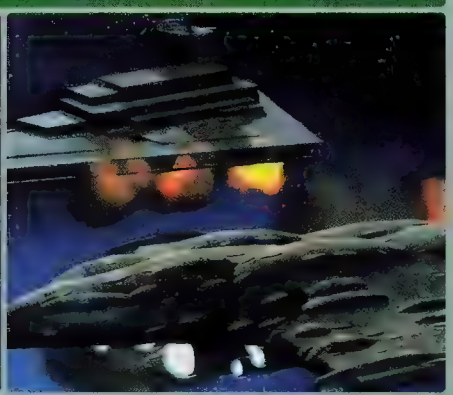
Gotta love Ikea's modular designs. TIE fighters, TIE tanks—whatever you need, they got it!



Don't forget, these are some of the guys who created *C&C: Generals*. They know what they're doing.



This is just one of many furious space battles you'll be having in the final game.



"They'll stand a better chance than they do against that Death Star!"

URL: **www.hasbro.com** PRICE: **$29.99**

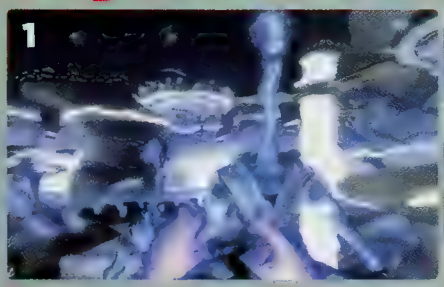
SOUND IMPERIAL

Not everyone can sound as cool as James Earl Jones, but with the Darth Vader Voice Changer Mask, you're welcome to try. Slip the ominous mask over your noggin and listen as your voice is transformed into that of the Dark Lord of the Sith. Get as kinky as you want with it or just order your roommate to take out the garbage. It also comes with a couple of famous sound bites from the movie. The only question: Which button do you press to signal your parents to pick you up?

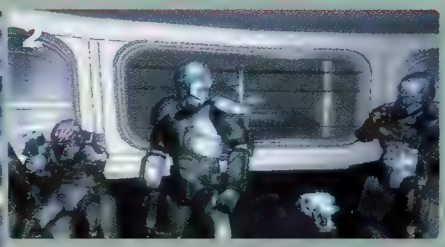
PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **LucasArts** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **March 2005**

Star Wars **Republic Commando**

The Clone Wars have begun—and *Republic Commando* puts you in the thick of the mayhem. LucasArts' upcoming squad-based first-person action game is just around the corner, and we're taking you along for the ride. Look over our collective shoulders as we command four elite clone troopers infiltrating a Geonosian strategy center.

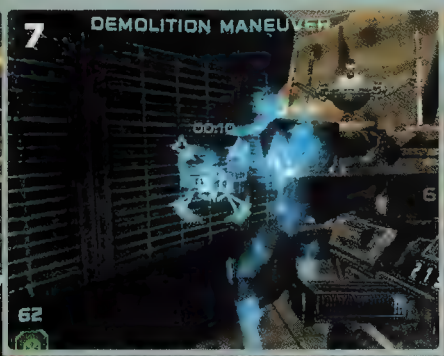


Awwww, you sure were a cute little clone baby. Born to kill!



These are your teammates. The guy in yellow, Scorch, is the funny one; in red is Sev, the quiet one. Wearing green is Fixer, the pretty one. Guess that makes you "Ringo."

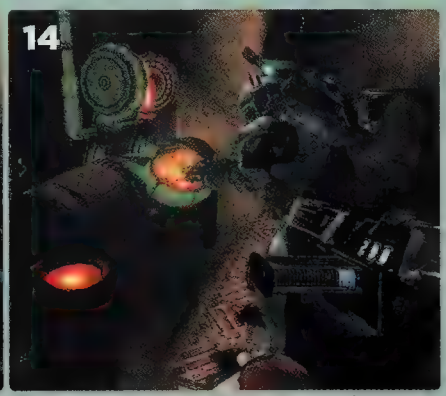
Up ahead, rendezvous with Six-Two, who specializes in making things go boom.



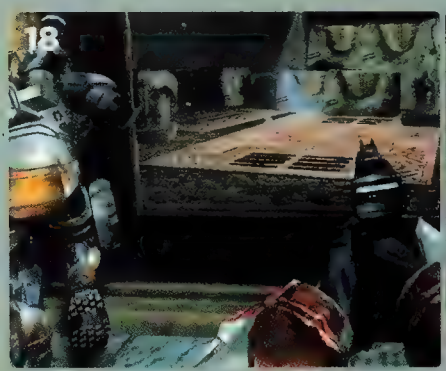
Make sure you cover Six-Two while he's arming his explosives—he'll need a little time to set everything up.

Fresh out of Black Flag spray, we'll have to make do by pacifying Geonosians with a rifle.

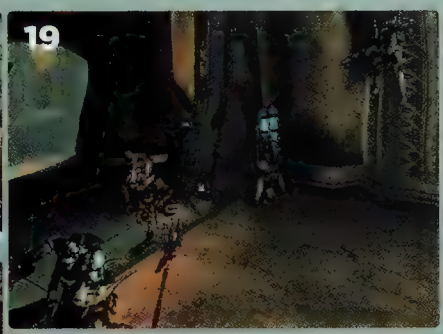
Here's Four-Zero, your security specialist. Whatever you do, don't call him "four eyes."



Four-Zero is teh 3L337 hacker. He can slice through computer systems and open secure doors.

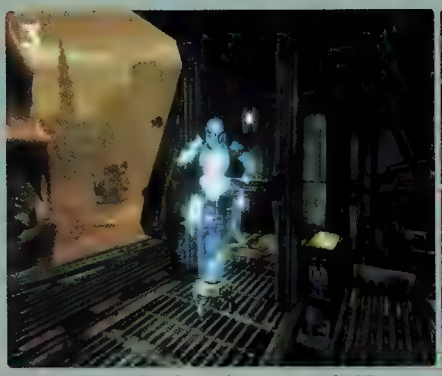


Ah, daylight! Your final goal is up ahead, in the Geonosian strategy room.



After rappelling down from the balcony, you'll meet up with your cool-as-ice sniper, Zero-Seven. He doesn't say much...but then again, his bullets do the talking.

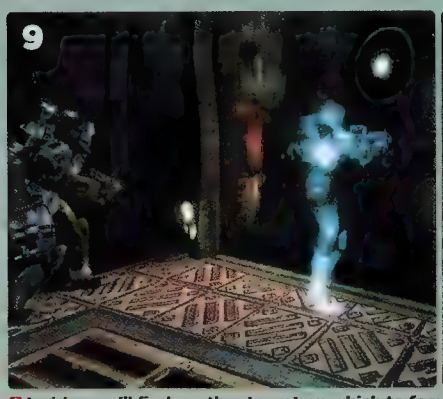
Yeah, good idea, bad guys—they'll never get through this glass wall! Sheesh.



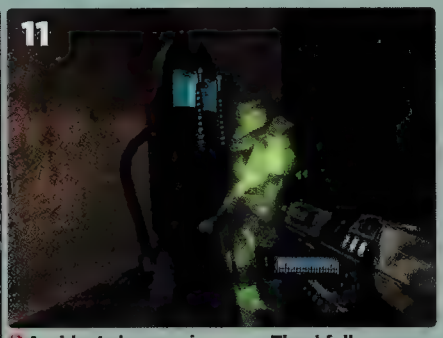
Orders incoming from the commander! Pay attention, jarhead!

First order of business: Secure the area around the crash site—and destroy all the obligatory creepy spidery-lookin' droids.

After sending 'em back to the scrap heap, grab some grenades—it's time to blow stuff up.



Inside, you'll find another target on which to focus Six-Two's pyromania.



Accidents happen in space. Thankfully, a bacta dispenser is always nearby. This looks way more comfortable than it did in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Man down! If you're ever incapacitated, you can restart a mission. Or, if you wait, the team might be able save your bacon, carry you to safety, and provide first aid.

In the hangar up ahead, you'll need to destroy a few parked space cruisers. Six-Two is more than happy to oblige.

Hope you're not afraid of the dark—fortunately, your helmet's got a night-light, just in case.

This droid could rip a Wookiee's arms off. Stay clear and blast him with everything you've got.

Once the droid goes down, order your squad to breach the final door.

This is where Zero-Seven gets his chance to shine by taking out the escaping Geonosian lieutenant's ship. Mission accomplished!

A Rebel B-wing, as seen through the cockpit of a TIE light-duty fighter.

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Sony Online Entertainment** GENRE: **Space-Combat Sim** ESRB RATING: **T**
REQUIRED: **Pentium III 933, 512MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 3GB install, 56K Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 1GB RAM, 64MB videocard, broadband Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively**

Star Wars Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed

Finally adding stars to the wars

Jump to Lightspeed won't win _Star Wars Galaxies_ many new fans, but it's an excellent enhancement for those who've stuck with the game. It includes four new professions: Imperial Navy pilot, Rebel Alliance pilot, privateer pilot, and shipwright. The latter of these is simply a new crafting role, enabling you to build ship chassis and components to sell. It's the first three that will be the most interesting to longtime players. In reality, these three jobs are actually just different pilot variations, but the side you align yourself with determines not only the skills you learn, but also the ships available to you.

EARNING YOUR WINGS

Becoming a pilot is easy—just install the expansion and visit a pilot trainer. Pilot skills don't require the expenditure of any skill points, so veteran players won't have to sacrifice any hard-earned class skills to become a pilot and advance through the profession. This was a generous decision, and one that defines the expansion. It's a completely ancillary element to *Galaxies*, like a fairly extensive minigame that, other than allowing you to earn credits by flying, has relatively little impact on the main game.

The most surprising thing about *Jump to Lightspeed* is that the action is actually action oriented. You control your ship (even using a flight stick if you choose), aim, and fire, as in a traditional space-combat sim. No automated combat from *Earth & Beyond* or *Eve* here. Moreover, each ship type handles noticeably differently. Don't assume that combat relies on pilot skill, though. In the end, success in ship-to-ship combat depends almost entirely on your ship's equipment, and your equipment depends entirely on your experience. This is actually a brilliant design decision, combining a bit of skill with the traditional leveling system of MMORPGs. Your ability to outmaneuver an enemy will have some impact on your combat success, as will executing the pilot skills

The Sullustans are one of the two new playable species. They're better known as "that funny-looking thing that flew the *Millennium Falcon* with Lando."

The second new playable species is the Ithorian, otherwise known as the Hammerhead.

Rebel pilots get these orange jumpsuits, while Imperial pilots get sleek black suits.

In multiplayer ships, you can stand up and walk around, taking control of the cockpit or guns as you wish.

you gain as you advance, but in the end, you're rewarded for your time investment. Ships have excellent targeting, so as long as you can line up the crosshairs and fire, the most important factor is that your weapons can penetrate the enemy's defenses faster than his can penetrate yours.

Once you've spent some time learning the basics, it's time to get out of your training ship and into a craft of your own design. Ships are expensive and, unfortunately, you can't purchase a ready-to-fly vehicle. You need not only a chassis (an unnecessarily complicated two-step process), but also all of the necessary components to make the ship fly and fight. Designing your ship is an interesting element because each chassis can hold only a certain amount of mass, forcing you to decide, for instance, between better armor or more powerful weapons. With your own ship, combat gets more interesting. Missions adjust to your level, so you'll usually be up against challenging opponents, getting ample experience and loot as a reward.

FLYING LIGHT

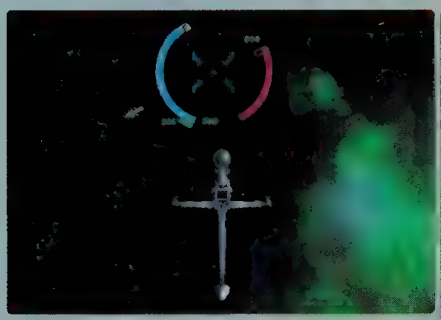
The expansion's only major problem is that it skimps a bit on content. There are plenty of features, but the missions themselves can get repetitive. You'll primarily be flying duty missions—unending battle or escort missions that increase your experience and rewards—but they can become somewhat dull, even if you move to another sector for a change of scenery. Not that this problem is different than the ground game's (MMORPGs are, by their nature, repetitive), but it's more difficult to make outer space look interesting for very long. That's not to say *Jump to Lightspeed* looks bad; seeing a B-wing fly by the cockpit of your TIE fighter is still a pretty cool thing. But, problematically, the load times and lag in *Galaxies* are as bad as ever, which can make returning to port a time-consuming chore.

Despite the somewhat repetitive missions, *Jump to Lightspeed* is a worthwhile investment for any *Star Wars Galaxies* player, if only for the fact that you can use your own ships to quickly travel from planet to planet. Think of it as an inexpensive means of avoiding the long wait for the shuttles, and, if you choose, a chance to waste some TIE interceptors or Y-wings en route.

Verdict ★★★½☆

A solid expansion that was worth the wait for longtime *Galaxies* residents.

SPACE COMBAT COMBINES A BIT OF SKILL WITH THE TRADITIONAL LEVELING SYSTEM OF MMORPGS.

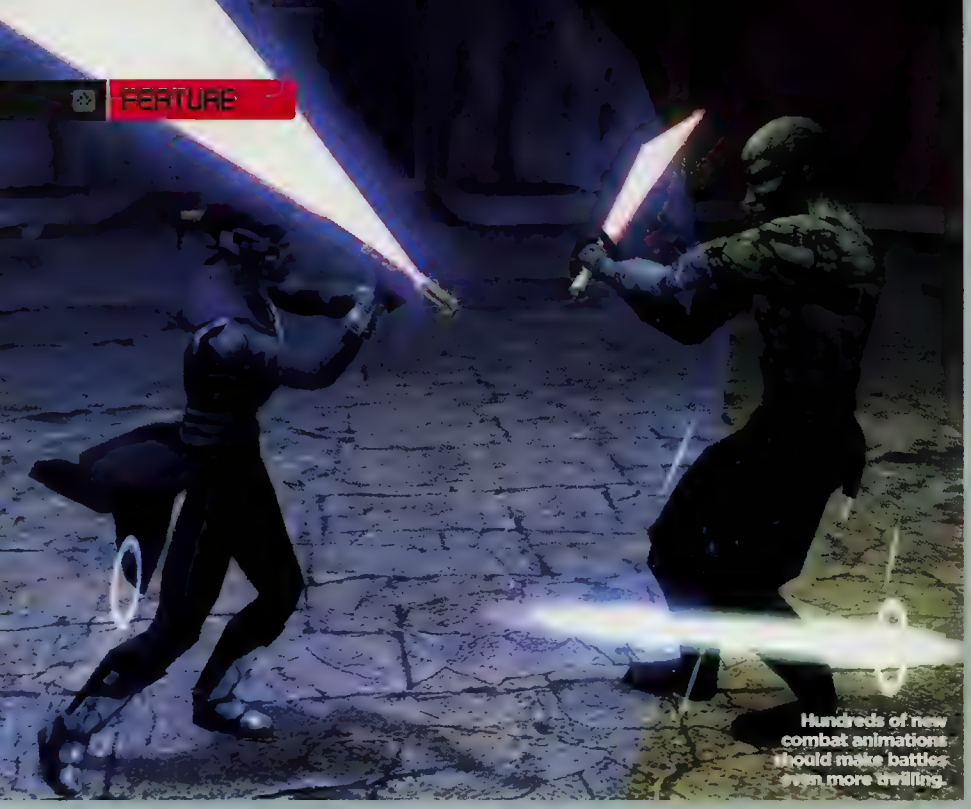


The B-wing changes to an "open" position to fire, a form that handles differently than the standard flight mode.

The targeting computer makes combat easy for those who are scared of the twitch factor.

THE SHIPS

The faction you align yourself with will determine which ships are available to you. The Imperial Navy, for instance, starts you off with a standard TIE fighter, but you can move up to TIE aggressors, TIE bombers, and TIE interceptors. Rebel Alliance pilots get access to the "alphabet" ships, such as A-wings, B-wings, Y-wings, and X-wings. Freelance privateers get a more colorful assortment of ships (almost all of which are named for creatures in the game), like the Hutt Dunelizard, the M3-A Scyk, and the Kimogila. Each faction also has access to multiplayer ships, allowing two or more players to act as pilots or gunners. These include the YT-1300; basically, it's the *Millennium Falcon*, and you can walk around inside.



Hundreds of new combat animations should make battles even more thrilling.

KATA CHAMELEON

If there was one complaint about becoming a Jedi in the first *KOTOR*, it was that after a certain fairly early point in the game, your characters would be stuck with pretty much the same weapon for the rest of the way. To make sure your lightsaber doesn't get boring, *KOTOR II* is adding different forms to the weapon. These specialized fighting styles will grant you a wide variety of bonuses and benefits—one may be great for defending against blaster fire, another may help in your healing, and another may make your attack against other lightsaber users even more devastating. All that, plus it's just kinda fun to say, "Shii-Cho lightsaber form."

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Obsidian Entertainment** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **Available Now**

Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

You'll never forget your second time

How do you live up to the legacy of last year's Game of the Year? Simple—you surpass it. That seems to be the game plan for *KOTOR II*. After playing through the entire first planet of the new game—some six riveting hours—we may be looking at the *KOTOR* series' version of *The Empire Strikes Back*.

The Sith Lords hits the ground running, throwing you right into a story that promises as many dramatic twists and turns as in the first game. This time out, you're immediately the center of the story, desperately struggling to escape a devastated mining colony. It's a subtle but significant change from the more leisurely, let's-help-out-the-citizenry style of the earlier game.

There's a new cast of characters this time out, including some more treacherously charming HK droids, and these characters are richer and more interesting than the sidekicks in the first *KOTOR*. That's a good thing, too, because from the earliest stages of the game, you'll be jumping away from your main character and party to control distant companions. This has the effect of giving the life-and-death drama of the game a broader feel and should give every character a moment to shine (or not, should you choose the dark side).

Within an hour of starting the game, the main character has already started getting Force powers, our favorite being Force scream, an area-of-effect sonic attack perfect for softening up squads of invading Sith. *KOTOR II* has over 60 new feats and Force powers, making this early access to the Force a truly welcome change.

Is there more? Sure—there are new classes, new weapons, a refined combat system with more options, and, well, more. But you don't have to believe us. This sucker should be out moments after you read this. Go find out for yourself.

Three against one? That's not even close to fair...to them.

WE MAY BE LOOKING AT THE *KOTOR* SERIES' VERSION OF *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*.

Going for the jump shot.

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WHEN WOR

The original *EverQuest* helped kick-start the current MMO craze. Now the sequel is up against some stiff competition in the form of *World of WarCraft*. These are two very polished and engaging games—hence the dual 4.5 star ratings. *EQ2* delivers a more hardcore high-fantasy experience, while *WOW*'s livelier cartoonish universe offers a more casual, whimsical level grind. We love *EQ2*, but *WOW* has us hopelessly hooked and gets the nod.

BRAVE NEWBIE WORLD

Enemy conning and simple quests may feel unsatisfying for more experienced gamers, but newbies will really appreciate the help that *EQ2* gives every step of the way. From the moment those of you uninitiated in RPGs create your characters with simple class and race choices and board the "refugee boat" for your first in-game tutorial, you will feel sure of what to do. The tutorial explains step by step how to do everything from moving a character around to wielding a weapon, picking up loot, and talking to NPCs. Everything in the main Options menu is easy to understand and a newbie-friendly first quest introduces many city features, including your initial player housing.

ONLINE LDS COLLIDE

The two top MMORPGs, *EverQuest II* and *World of WarCraft*, square off. Who loses? Your social life

BRAVE NEWBIE WORLD

Rather than focus on a bunch of explicit, boring tutorials, *WoW* teaches you the ropes and eases you into the game so slyly that you'll barely even notice you're in school. Instead of pitched battles against rabbits, cats, rats, and other tiny animals that you could kill in real life without much effort, the game immediately pits you against actual monsters. Garden-variety animals exist—you're just not expected to fight them. They merely hop around and occasionally get devoured by a passing predator. Since there aren't any artificial zone boundaries, you're free to wander wherever you want to right from the start, which removes the penned-in feeling common to low-level characters in most other MMORPGs.

Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment **Developer:** Sony Online Entertainment **Genre:** MMORPG **ESRB:** [illegible] **Required:** Pentium [illegible] 512MB, 64MB videocard, 7GB install, 56K Internet **Recommended:** Pentium 4 2GHz, 1GB RAM, 128MB video card **Multiplayer:** Massive for sure

EverQuest II

The gargantuan dragon of online gaming returns

EDITOR'S CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

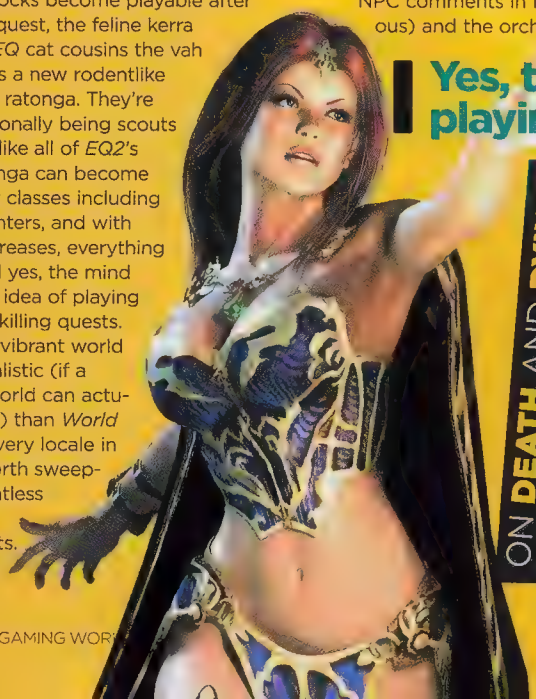
Centuries have passed since *EverQuest*'s original time line; Antonica has shattered into islands and Luclin's moon has exploded. Norrath encompasses just two opposing cities: righteous Qeynos, led by a compassionate dignitary, and evil Freeport, controlled by a merciless overlord. Welcome to the sequel to the most successful MMO ever. Welcome to *EverQuest II*.

All of *EverQuest*'s races are available in *EverQuest II*, although some must start in one city or the other due to their good or evil alignments. (Cities—and city-restricted level 20 subclass choices—can be changed with the completion of a betrayal quest, though.) Froglocks become playable after a server-wide quest, the feline kerra race replaces *EQ* cat cousins the vah shir, and there's a new rodentlike race called the ratonga. They're listed as traditionally being scouts or mages, but like all of *EQ2*'s races, the ratonga can become any of the four classes including priests and fighters, and with careful stat increases, everything evens out. And yes, the mind boggles at the idea of playing as a rat on rat-killing quests.

This is a big, vibrant world that's more realistic (if a high-fantasy world can actually be realistic) than *World of WarCraft*. Every locale in *EQ2* sprawls forth sweepingly, and countless NPCs will offer you quests. Although *EQ2* isn't earth-shattering in the way its predecessor was, and although it still harbors zone-based locales with load screens instead of a seamless world, its production values are high. NPCs have full voiceovers in addition to text speech (the sarcastic NPC comments in Freeport are hilarious) and the orchestral soundtrack swells to emphasize battles. Water effects impress, and the normal mapping looks gorgeous; you can almost feel the flaxen cloth of your mage's robes. The backdrops feature lifelike stone and wood textures as well as lavish flora and every sort of aggressive fauna imaginable.

EverQuest II is a prodigious, polished, pretty package, so what's the catch? It's aimed at new and casual gamers more than the hardcore MMORPG audience. This can be good if you fit the bill, but engrossing quests and truly scary battles are not easy to come by before the upper levels of the game. The maps, waypoints, NPC locators, and quest helper hints will assure that you're never lost, but many quests are overly simple "fetch me some water" or "kill 10 undead knights" affairs disconnected

Yes, the mind boggles at the idea of playing as a rat on rat-killing quests.



ON DEATH AND DYING

In the original *EverQuest*, you have to make a corpse run to get your loot back after dying and you lose already-earned XP, sometimes even to the point of leveling down. Things are easier in *EverQuest II*. You don't lose loot when you die but only suffer slight damage to your armor and weapons, which can be repaired cheaply by NPC menders. You also incur minor stat penalties and a lien on future experience called XP debt; part of your XP earned after a death goes to pay that off while the other part continues to help you level, *City of Heroes*–style. A soul shard dropped where you died eliminates over half of your debt, or you can opt for three real-time days of lowered stats and work off the full debt, or stay logged off for several days, at which point your stats return to normal and most of your debt disappears.

Publisher: Blizzard **Developer:** Blizzard **Genre:** MMORPG **ESRB Rating:** T **Required:** Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 4GB install, 56K Internet **Recommended:** Pentium 4 1.6GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard, Broadband Internet **Multiplayer:** Massive!

World of WarCraft

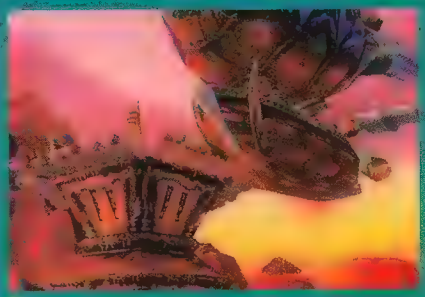
It's not just a job, it's an adventure

EDITORS' CHOICE CGW

If *City of Heroes* proved that you could give an MMORPG broad appeal by simply removing many of the tedious elements that more or less define the genre, *World of WarCraft* demonstrates that you can get the same results and still leave all that crap in. *World of WarCraft* doesn't stray far from tradition, but it does streamline the model in virtually every way. Through sheer force of player-friendly design, it's one of the very rare massively multiplayer games that doesn't quickly devolve into a second job with elves.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO HOME, BUT YOU CAN'T STAY HERE

Unlike many MMORPG developers, someone on the design team at Blizzard seems to have realized that they were making a game rather than a surrogate life. From the lack of permanent player housing to an experience system that rewards players for occasionally logging out and doing something else for a while, many design choices appear to have been implemented to encourage you to not take it all so seriously. With that in mind, *WoW* may be the least punitive massively multiplayer game ever created. There's very little downtime. Health and powers both regenerate at an unprecedented rate. The small amount of regeneration time that still exists between fights is often camouflaged by looting and practicing trade skills.



You can take this blimp to various capital cities.

Though it's streamlined, *WoW* certainly isn't shallow.

ON DEATH AND DYING

There's virtually no death penalty in *World of WarCraft*. As long as you're willing to run back to your corpse (often within a few minutes' walk of your respawn point), there's no penalty other than some minor and easily repairable equipment damage. Or you can resurrect immediately and suffer a slightly stiffer hit to your equipment and a temporary stat reduction. Most MMOs feature so many onerous elements in the actual gameplay that death needs to be extra bad so it doesn't seem like a little vacation from the drudgery. Because everything in *WoW* is so efficient and entertaining, dying is but a temporary break from the action and yet still seems like a perfectly suitable penalty.

A MINUTE TO LEARN, A LIFETIME TO ETC., ETC.

Though it is streamlined, *WoW* certainly isn't shallow. The game features eight races (human, night elf, gnome, dwarf, orc, undead, tauren, and troll) split into two factions (alliance and horde). Each of the races offers special racial talents. For instance, the undead can regain health by devouring corpses. While that's more or less typical in this type of game, the radical differences in the mechanics of the nine classes are unusual. Each class (druid, hunter, mage, paladin, warlock, priest, rogue, shaman, and warrior) not only has unique abilities, but also features a unique interface. Every class offers a truly distinct experience. Abilities can be purchased from trainers at level intervals. Any player of a given class and level will typically have the exact same set of fundamental abilities. Starting at level 10, however, you can put points into a *Diablo*-like skill tree that generally increases the effectiveness of various abilities. In this way, two level 60 shamans can still have wildly different capabilities. In keeping with the game's player-friendly

The commonlands outside Freeport have a lot of group mobs and are good XP sources for a team.

THE PVP MYSTERY

There's no PVP in *EverQuest II*, just like there was no PVP in the first *EverQuest*. Sony Online Entertainment has steadfastly maintained that it likes to keep its focus squarely on delivering a quality, player-versus-environment playing experience. *EverQuest* has always been about fostering community (part of the rationale for the long resting periods to heal in the first game was that people would chat and bond during the downtime), and it's hard to develop one cohesive *EQ* community with half of it warring against the other. You could argue that PVP would forge each side into stronger, separate communities, but Sony isn't buying that argument. And considering the overwhelming success of the first game, there's no reason it should.

from any continuing story line.

Attack moves and spells are snazzy, and every battle is locked against outside interference to prevent kill stealing (an appreciated, thoughtful new feature), but *EQ2* is almost too friendly, revealing too much information in its conning for a seasoned gamer. The rigid interface leaves little question about whether or not you can defeat any mob, be it orc, gnoll, beast, bird, reptile, or vermin. The con tells you the exact level of the baddie, its relative difficulty within that level, and whether it will agro or not. It also states whether you can defeat that enemy solo or if you'll need a group. The minute you con one mob, any linking mobs (enemies that will agro with it) immediately flash, too, and none of it can be disabled in options. Teaming during battles can be frantically fun at times despite this, but the game would feel more immersive and spontaneous if you could disable some of the targeting details.

EverQuest II mostly doles out predesignated skills as you level, so character customization comes from loot and skill upgrades. Player artisans sell custom weapons and armor if you can afford them, plus better-quality spell and attack scrolls so you can upgrade the baseline apprentice I skills you earn leveling. Alternatively, limited instanced quests have been added in an effort to reduce camping, although it's still alive and well. Powerful adept I and master I upgrade scrolls are only rarely dropped from boss encounters, and adept III scrolls are difficult for players to craft due to recipe and ingredient shortages, so you can either create or buy upgraded apprentice-level scrolls or pitch a tent yourself in hopes of finding better ones. Fortunately, much of the game feels balanced for apprentice III scrolls, and many crafters create and sell these inexpensively.

You can also increase your power with the new Heroic Opportunities, which are midbattle strengthened buffs and attacks that players create by clicking their Heroic Opportunities icons and then using onscreen-indicated skills in the correct order to complete a chain. Many attacks and spells can be performed this way, and Heroic Opportunities can be used while soloing or teaming. Team communication must be good, though, because if one player activates a skill out of order after a Heroic Opportunity has begun, it cancels it. It's a little like a button-mashing round of onscreen Simon Says, but it's still fun and offers you stronger powers than you'd otherwise have.

EverQuest II launched in stable condition except for a few crashes and bugs, the most serious bug being that the default fighter melee attack and a scout specialized attack don't always function. It's a young game, though, and with a few fixes, more involving quests, and adjustable conning options, it could wind up influencing a new generation of MMORPGs. It might be too friendly for old-school, hardcore EQ players to make the jump, but for gamers looking for a classic fantasy MMO, *EverQuest II* should fit the bill very nicely. **Denice Cook**

Verdict ★★★★½

A polished package for newer gamers; RPG veterans may find they're hit over the head harder by the conning system than by the mobs.

WHOEVER HAS THE MOST

Both *EverQuest II* and *World of WarCraft* have come out with ridiculously overdone collector's editions. Is either really worth the money? Let's crack open the boxes and check them out.

The game comes in a handy metallic case—perfect for clubbing someone over the head. Inside are three DVD-ROMs housing *EQ2*, and a soundtrack CD. You also get a softcover book with 128 pages of concept art, a collector's coin that won't buy you a cup of coffee, and a cloth world map that doubles as a placemat for your Burger King Value Meal.

THE PVP MYSTERY

Once you get tired of questing and killing monsters, *World of WarCraft* does feature player-versus-player combat. It's purely consensual on regular servers and a free-for-all outside safe areas on designated PVP servers. Though the PVP currently works, there aren't any quantifiable rewards (or penalties) for engaging in it yet. The honor system that's mentioned in the manual was axed sometime before release. Blizzard appears to be working diligently on it, though, so by the time you read this, buy the game, and reach a high enough level to participate in it, we're pretty confident that the PVP will be more structured.

philosophy, you can pay a fee to reallocate your specialization points.

The dreaded level treadmill has been disguised more than fixed. There's so little downtime, so much action, and so many things to see, buy, make, and daydream about that there's very little time left to brood over your experience bubbles. Gaining levels is still ultimately the driving force behind everything you do, but there are lots of little in-between goals to concentrate on. Quests are the biggest of these distractions. Unless you really want to, you won't spend much time wandering around aimlessly murdering monsters. The box says there are more than 2,000 quests in the game, and while I haven't actually counted, there's definitely a whole hell of a lot of them. The landscape is lousy with people who need things made, fetched, done, discovered, and killed.

LOOKING GOOD

The quests each include a little story that, taken together, paint a complete portrait of the world of *World of WarCraft*. You can safely ignore all this reading, however, and concentrate on the terrific visuals, which paint an even more complete portrait of the world. Though *WoW* requires less hardware (and is probably pushing fewer poly-

The orc city of Orgrimmar really shows off the excellent art design of the game.

I made this night elf look just like Wolverine. Take that, *City of Heroes*.

gons and hide fewer pixels than much of its competition, it still somehow looks better. The game represents a triumph of art direction over technology. It's stylized without being simplistic and colorful without being garish.

Continuing *WoW*'s commitment to reduced downtime, the game has virtually no load times. There's a brief initial load and another brief load when you change continents or enter the occasional instanced dungeon. Otherwise, the entire game is a seamless experience. This lack of load times has more practical effect on whether you feel like the resident of an actual place than any amount of convolutedly unsatisfying world-building hoo-ha.

I was a little surprised at how much I connected in this type of game but didn't want to invest the time required to actually play one. *World of WarCraft* is the game you've been waiting for. It's designed to let players make significant progress without requiring a decisive commitment to sitting motionless in front of the computer for days at a time. Unfortunately, the game's so addictive that you may end up with a pile of keyboards. Anyway, **Erik Wolpaw**

Verdict ★★★★½

As it has countless times before, Blizzard has refined and polished a genre to near perfection.

TOYS, WINS

The suitcase-sized *World of WarCraft* box is a massive obelisk of value. There's a limited-edition DVD with cinematics, commentaries, and "making of" features; a huge hardcover book with concept art; a soundtrack CD; and a cloth map. Here's where it gets downright insidious, though: The game comes with DVD-ROM and CD-ROM versions. Install one version on your machine and hand off the other to a buddy. A second serial number is included in the box for an extra 14-day trial!

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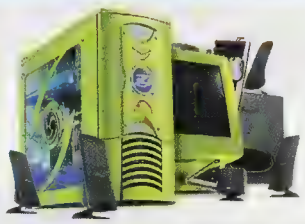

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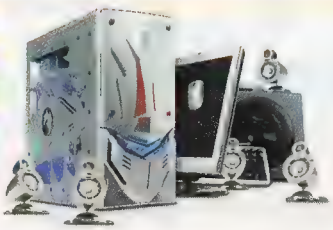

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Editors' Choice

Amongst its many charms, the gravity gun lets you pick up chain-saw blades and shoot them at enemies to slice them in half.

Antlions are your friends. Squeezing this ball summons them to your side to do the fighting for you.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal Games** DEVELOPER: **Valve Software** GENRE: **FPS** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.2GHz, 256MB RAM, DirectX 7-level videocard, 4.5GB install, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM, DirectX 9-level videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-32 players)**

Half-Life 2

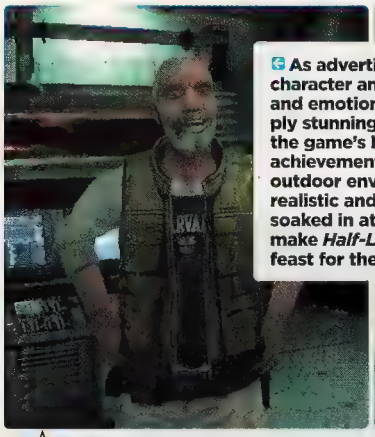
Flirting with greatness

Hi there, annoying metallic flying thing! I am about to hurl you to your death with the gravity gun! Bye! Hi, Gordon! We're here to help! Too bad our aim sucks and we don't really do much!

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines
Undead and loving it.

Sid Meier's Pirates!
Take, take, take...take some booty! Get down!

LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth
Quite possibly the best use of a movie license ever.



As advertised, the character animations and emotions are simply stunning and one of the game's best achievements. Huge outdoor environments, realistic and gritty and soaked in atmosphere, make *Half-Life 2* a feast for the eyes.

EDITORS' CHOICE

Valve Software's design genius could surprise us only once. And in 1998, it did, with *Half-Life*, a game that arrived with minimal hype but has since been almost universally acknowledged as the best first-person shooter ever made. *Half-Life*'s artistic triumph was simply unprecedented, making nearly every shooter that came before it (and nearly all of them since) seem amateurish by comparison.

With its long-awaited sequel, Valve doesn't have the same luxury of surprise. After years of anticipation, hype, and delays, *Half-Life 2 had* to be great—anything less would seem a failure. If *Half-Life 2* does not quite reach the transcendence of the first game, it is still a marvel of design, still one of the best games of 2004, and still ample proof that Valve operates at a higher creative level than most everyone else in this business.

FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS

The biggest and only serious bummer of *Half-Life 2* is the installation—and it's so bad that we're knocking down the game's final score (see sidebar). Once the action actually begins, however, it takes all of about 20 seconds to get over any installation woes and realize you are back in the hands of game designers who draw you into their world with anticipation and suspense.

Once again you are Gordon Freeman, the crowbar-wielding heroic everyman, thrown into a nightmare world. As the game opens, you find yourself in a burned-out, Eastern European, Orwellian nightmare of a city called "City 17," where human rebels are mounting a resistance against the Combine, the aliens from the first game, who have now taken over Earth. As in the first game, *Half-Life 2* just drops you into the action and makes you deal—and it's such a cool way to start a game that you have to wonder why no one else seems to do it.

From here, you are completely in Valve's hands for a very linear roller coaster of an experience—the designers eschew the player "freedom" of games like *GTA* to maintain tight control at all times. In lesser hands, this might be depressing—but fortunately, Valve knows how to make an excellent roller coaster. As in the first game, every turn reveals new challenges, twists, enemies to fight, and puzzles to solve. Even if you are doing the same thing over and over, you never feel that way because Valve so expertly paces it all.

As advertised, the artwork and animation are breathtaking. Characters move and talk in a way so realistic that it's eerie. The physics engine, too, is a marvel, requiring you to manipulate and interact with objects in the world in order to solve puzzles and proceed through the levels. The scripted sequences of the first game are back, but they actually feel less important this time around, in a good way, because the world itself just feels more alive. (I could have played "fetch" with Dog for hours.) And the sound effects and music in *Half-Life 2* are some of the best I've ever heard. The howling wind at Ravenholm, the anguished cries of the zombies, and the subtle, brief techno riffs that pop up at key moments perfectly accentuate the game's tone and mood.

LESS THAN PERFECT

But for all the game's brilliance, *Half-Life 2* has a few more seams showing than the first game did. Whereas the original *Half-Life* had a nearly faultless pace, there are two vehicular episodes here—on an airboat and scout car—that drag on too long. Monster design seems a tad lazier than one would have expected, with not enough new creatures and too many repeats from the first game. (Yes, we love headcrabs, but enough is enough.) The story is far more nebulous than the first game's, and it ends with a kind of "huh?" moment that doesn't nearly give the payoff you'd expect after 15 to 20 hours of being kept in the dark. My experience was also plagued with bad sound stuttering, long load times, and a few lockups that forced me to reboot my PC right in the middle of the action.

So, it's not perfect. It's not the greatest game of all time. It's not even the greatest *Half-Life* of all time, an honor I would still give to the first game, if only because many of Valve's clever tricks were seen there first. Still, it's clear with *Half-Life 2* that Valve's artistry is unmatched in this industry—at least as far as shooters are concerned—and, like all great artists, it makes its ambitious undertaking feel like it was the easiest, most natural thing in the world. You play a game like *Half-Life 2* and wonder, "Why can't all games be this good?" **Jeff Green**

Verdict ★★★★½

Not the best game ever—or even the best *Half-Life* ever—but still a stunning achievement.

Half-Life 2: The Install

If you read one of the early *Half-Life 2* "reviews," then you learn nothing about the game's installation. That's because early-bird journalists had to play at Valve's office, where it was already pre-installed—a smart move on Valve's part, because the install program, Steam, is an obtrusive, user-hostile abomination.

Steam's upside is that it lets users directly download *Half-Life 2*—obviously, the wave of the future. Those buying it this way are mostly reporting success.

But for those who buy it at a store on CDs or DVD, *Half-Life 2* still requires an Internet connection to install and forces you to create an online Steam account (which loads every time you start your PC), then goes through a laborious "unlocking" procedure before letting you play the first time. First-day server problems made me wait a whopping six hours to play.

Because your *Half-Life 2* copy is keyed to your Steam account, it severely restricts your ability to trade, resell, or buy the game used. Valve's attempts to limit these practices by forcing you to register with its online program just to play, adding unnecessary clutter to your PC's startup, are just lame—and so we're docking the game half a star.

PUBLISHER: **DreamCatcher Interactive** DEVELOPER: **People Can Fly** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 384MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 1.2GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-16 players)**

Painkiller: Battle Out of Hell

One hell of an opening, but only a heck of a finish

True to the original *Painkiller, Battle Out of Hell* is a roller coaster ride (quite literally, at one point). But unlike the original *Painkiller*, this roller coaster occasionally stalls and has some long stretches that could have used a corkscrew or even a slight bank.

Are WWII-era suicide bombers in questionable taste?

HEAVEN CAN WAIT

You begin in the orphanage, one of the most delicious "This is so wrong!" levels ever to grace a first-person shooter. It's this ride's first exhilarating drop, that moment of sheer glee when you know you're in for a hell of a great time. Next comes the first loop-de-loop, a lurid circus level to top all circus levels. Until now, the original *Blood* had done the circus thing best. *Max Payne 2* did it most recently. But this is the mother of all circus levels, a giddy Grand Guignol of evil clowns, puppets, colored lights, and music. It's an absolutely perfect showcase for the fiendishly creative talent of the developers at People Can Fly.

This roller coaster occasionally stalls and has some long stretches that could have used a corkscrew or even a slight bank.

Kids these days...

I love the voodoo that you do.

So far, so great. Then you get to the first stall, where it feels like the ride is trying to build more momentum. The lab level is like that second hill in a roller coaster, which is needed to get more altitude. No big deal. After all, you just had two amazing levels, so there's bound to be a bit of filler. And sure enough, next up is a whooping good time in a modern city, with body parts whistling down through the skyscrapers, splatting onto the pavement, and assembling themselves into zombies. It's a refreshing twist on the monsters-spawning-out-of-nowhere gimmick.

ALL REVVED UP WITH NO PLACE TO GO

But everything afterwards is pretty disappointing in comparison. The rest of *Battle Out of Hell* is by no means bad, but it plays like *Painkiller*'s deleted scenes. Leningrad, the coliseum, and the interminable mines feel like variations on something you saw in the first game. And by the time it's over, you've killed a few hundred too many pirate skeletons, as if someone decided to stretch the endgame by an hour by just putting everything on a loop.

There are three places in *Battle Out of Hell* where the ride comes to a screeching halt because you are forced to make a difficult jump. These are the times when *Painkiller*'s masterful sense of pacing dissolves into a repeated sequence of jump/die/reload. In the original game, there were frustrating jumps if you wanted to hunt for secret areas—but it was always optional. *Battle Out of Hell* puts them smack dab between you and the end of the level. Have fun quickloading!

The new weapons are good, but somewhat superfluous. A sniper rifle that launches multiple stakes is just the original stake gun turned up to 11, and the same is true of a rack of bouncing grenades. The flamethrower on the new submachine gun is the most useful addition. Since some of the new levels are really difficult, the expansion encourages you to play with different tarot card combos. So by the time the ride is over, there's no arguing that you got your money's worth. But as with any roller coaster, it's always the early part that's the best. **Tom Chick**

Verdict ★★★½☆

Plunging from great to *meh*.

PUBLISHER: **Novalogic** DEVELOPER: **Novalogic** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 56k Internet connection, 32MB videocard, 2GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 768MB RAM, 128MB videocard, broadband Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (Novaworld: 150 players)**

Joint Ops: Escalation

Escalation means more KIA

***Joint Ops: Escalation* hones an already solid military shooter to razor-sharp precision. It redeploys gamers to the battlefield jungles of Southeast Asia with more equipment, vehicles, and aircraft, and there has been just enough tweaking to make it as (or maybe more) fun than that other action-packed online combat game, *Battlefield 1942*.**

Escalation upgrades the original game's mediocre arsenal with an assortment of new weapons, like the ultrazippy G36 rifle, the stable and accurate FN-FNC rifle, and the spec-ops-modified MK23 pistol, as well as fresh equipment, including the Javelin missile, antitank mines, body armor, and parachutes. The parachute is the coolest new item, since it allows for airborne insertions into enemy territory in addition to offering pilots and crew members a last chance to jump from a damaged aircraft before it crashes and burns. Just remember to avoid parachuting into a nest of enemies.

Escalation kicks the fun level up by adding battle tanks and dirt bikes (great for getting to and from spawn points) to the motor pool and attack copters with kick-ass weapons systems at the airstrip. Since teamwork is the name of the game, these new vehicles and aircraft require cooperation for successful battlefield deployment. For example, the AH-64A Apache attack copter, both a tank buster and an infantry killer, needs a pilot for flying and a gunner for firing the weapon system.

Novalogic took some pointers from its players and significantly toned down sniping by making snipers a more challenging class. No longer can they sit perched along a ridge above a spawn point picking off a steady stream of respawning players at will. Now, soldiers spawn inside buildings and are better protected from those pesky long-distance shots. Snipers will also discover more bob and a lack of stability in their sight-alignment picture, even in the prone position, which is unrealistic but offers more play balance. Finally, bases have improved defenses, like armor-protected .50-caliber machine-gun emplacements—snipers will have a tougher time taking out the guns' operators, and invaders assaulting the base will think twice before attacking without planning or coordinating the attack.

A battle tank under—and quite possibly on—fire.

With an abundance of action and the enhanced fun factor, *Joint Ops: Escalation* makes a perfect *Battlefield 1942* alternative for those in search of more modern theaters of combat. **Raphael Liberatore**

Verdict ★★★★☆

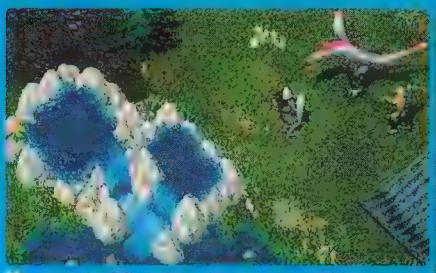
More guns, more vehicles, and lots more action.

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **Origin** GENRE: **MMORPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 400, 128MB RAM, 128k modem, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 800, 32MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Persistent-state world**

Ultima Online: Samurai Empire

Now with 100 percent more ninjas

Is this thing still on? Against all rational logic, the antiquated *Ultima Online* still somehow manages to survive in the cutthroat MMO marketplace...and what has Origin cooked up to contend with *EverQuest II* and *World of WarCraft*? Ninjas. That's right: ninjas. *Samurai Empire* introduces the Eastern-themed Tokuno Islands to the game and succeeds at immersing players in mythical Asian culture about as well as a UO ecumenism con—which is to say, not at all.



Instead of fighting dragons, you'll be fighting hiryu. Which are like dragons, but a whole lot meaner.

Admittedly, a few of the new house designs look pretty sharp.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

It's the exact same game you've been playing for about the past four years. Except with ninjas.

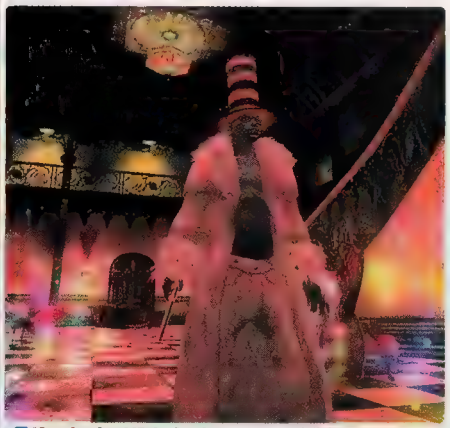
PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Troika Games** GENRE: **RPG** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.2GHz, 384MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 3.3GB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.0GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines

An RPG you can really sink your teeth into

One of the most modestly dressed women in the game, which really could be titled *Vampire: Bustlines*.

It may not feature the snazziest spell effects in gaming, but *Bloodlines*' spells are remarkably effective in dealing with the game world.



If only the NPCs in the game exhibited the same visual flair as this player character Malkavian....

I beat a man to death with a severed human arm last night. Actually, that's not true; I beat several men to death with a severed human arm. I also hacked my way through a cemetery full of brain-munching zombies, enslaved a gravely injured woman, stalked the sets of a snuff film operation, endured a brutal series of deadly experiments, and sometimes, just for fun, turned into a beastly juggernaut with razorlike claws and an unholy thirst for violence. Ah, good times, good times. It makes that whole cursed living dead thing somehow easier to deal with.

BLOOD SIMPLE

If you're looking for a game that will allow you to go on an unfettered neck-chomping rampage, you'll need to look elsewhere. Rampant vampirism in *Bloodlines* is quietly kept in check by two simple conceits: your character's humanity, which steadily dwindles with each inhuman act (killing an innocent, say) and could lead to a state of uncontrollable frenzy; and the eponymous masquerade, whereby all vampires basically pretend there's no such thing as vampires, the better to survive among unknowing mortals. Violate the masquerade too many times and a blood

A Nosferatu lurks in shadow.

Late in the game you'll have to contend with bands of tough vampire hunters. Suck 'em dry.

hunt will be called upon you by other vampires, you'll die, game over. Lose too much humanity and you'll frenzy unpredictably, thus breaking the masquerade, thus forcing a blood hunt, and so on. Balancing your growing powers and your character's needs within these restrictions gives the game a constant delicate sense of tension, of tenuous balance.

An intricate character-creation scheme drives *Bloodlines*, constantly forcing you to make crucial decisions about where to apply the drips and drops of experience that come your way from completing quests (there's no XP for fighting monsters, except for the bosses). There are seven different types of vampires, running the gamut from Nosferatu so hideous they must move about a city through the sewers since simply being seen by a human would violate the masquerade, to the slick, establishment-loving Ventrue, who fight and hunt through little more than their irresistible force of will.

Complicating things is a vast number of skills that can be developed—lock picking, stealth, hacking, seduction, spells, and more—to let you craft a personalized lord of the undead. This is great, but it does task the designers with creating quests and scenarios that accommodate a variety of play styles. A little too often this boils down to offering players air ducts or hackable computers in lieu of locks they can pick—then again, *System Shock 2* offered similar choices, and it ruled.

DEAD ALIVE

Where *Bloodlines* really shines is in the world it creates, a nightmarish hell lurking just beneath the seedy surface of nighttime Los Angeles. While your character spends most of the game tracking down a missing sarcophagus that could presage the end of all vampires, you'll delve into some of the most hypnotically twisted environments (a haunted hotel and a crack house full of shambling dead stand out) and meet some of the most demonic beings imaginable.

Bloodlines looks like a first-person shooter, but it isn't. Even with the variety of vampires, much of the gameplay emphasizes stealth. This is good, because combat—particularly the third-person melee combat—is awkward at best. Fortunately, your vampire should mostly outmatch anything it runs up against, so fighting anything except some bosses shouldn't be too tough. So much of this game is spent uncovering the intrigue of vampire society, you'll likely be too involved in the story to mind the clumsiness of some battles.

Who doesn't love a flamethrower?

THE HATEFUL DEAD

Unfortunately, *Bloodlines* has so many rough edges you could use the CDs as saw blades. Chief among these are some insanely long level-load times—we're talking close to two minutes on a good machine. Once loaded, even the smaller levels can chug painfully at maybe one frame a second, complete with some ugly stuttering audio. Broken A.I. resulted in the entertaining "enemy running in place" phenomenon, and clipping issues plunged my character out of the game world into a black computer netherworld.

OK, so the Source engine still has some kinks to be worked out. But *Bloodlines* has some questionable things in its very design. There are too few character models, making every hooker in a city a clone and making Billy Idol so very proud, as nearly every person in a nightclub is dancing with themselves. And I feel that if I stealthily kill every guard in a temple, then I should enjoy the luxury of not having new ones suddenly appear in their place. There's more, but I'll stop here.

As annoying as these things are—and they are plenty annoying—they still can't detract from a game that creates such a darkly captivating world. The cliffhanger ending of *Bloodlines* has me thirsting for a sequel already. **Robert Coffey**

Where *Bloodlines* really shines is in the world it creates, a nightmarish hell lurking just beneath the seedy surface of nighttime Los Angeles.

Verdict ★★★★☆

A massive, hypnotic RPG that might go from "really good" to "great" once they patch it.

PUBLISHER: **DreamCatcher** DEVELOPER: **GolemLabs** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 2GB install, 64MB videocard**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-32 players)**

SuperPower 2

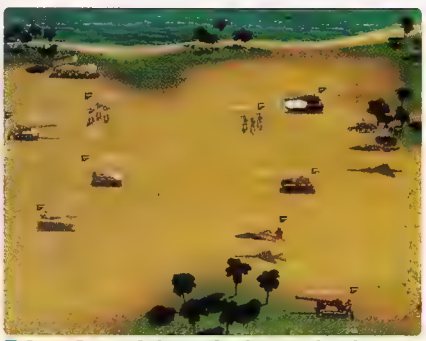
Zambia conquers the world!

Mark Twain once famously described Wagner's music as "much better than it sounds." Judging from all the "CIA, UN, and U.S. military data" touted on its box, one could say that *SuperPower 2* is much better than it plays. This is a spreadsheet masquerading as a game, and at its heart pulses a mountain of data on the nations of the world, their politics, relationships, economies, and militaries. But all the information that's been crammed into one game is meaningless unless it's a) presented in a fun and interesting way, and b) carefully woven together so that each part logically relates to the other parts and to the whole. *SuperPower 2* fails utterly in both regards.

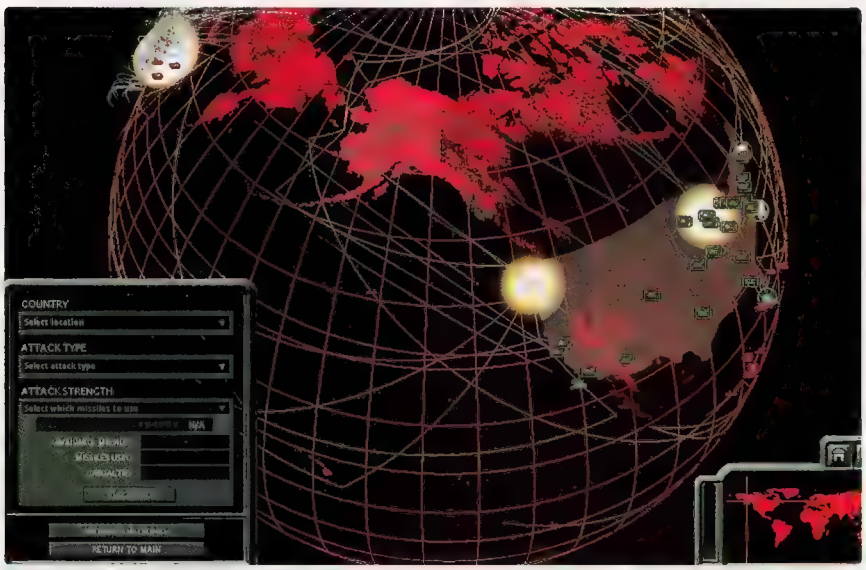
HAIL, HAIL FREEDONIA!

Billed as a game of strategy and world domination, *SuperPower 2* lays the entire globe at your feet as a handsome yet ultimately empty playing field. The game neatly follows three simultaneous tracks—military, political, and economic—allowing you to automate any or all of them. As leader of one of almost 200 nations, you use sliders and pop-up windows to relate to both your own population and the rest of the world. This involves the usual assortment of tax rates, trade, military construction and deployments, research, and treaties—much of it buried in illogical menus, and all of it united in an utterly inscrutable web of cause and effect relations.

Yet for all its many little bits and bobs, it's a surprisingly empty affair that offers little to do. The game is fabulously dull...eye-bleedingly dull. Dull in a way that calls for a new understanding of the entire concept of dullness. Matte finishes are merely dull. Philip Glass is really dull. But *SuperPower 2* is a sort of über-Platonic ideal of dullness, plus 10. It is wholly possible to begin a scenario, make a few changes to a few settings (such as the tax rate and military research and development), and simply run the game for 15 minutes at high speed while you read a book until the scenario goes "ping" and completes itself like a bag of microwave popcorn. Except you can't eat it.



***SuperPower 2* throws in close-up battle maps that show how a conflict is unfolding but don't let you control any units.**



Nuclear war is fun! You can craft fairly hearty nuclear payloads for a good old atomic showdown, which is nice to try once...but ultimately useless as a gameplay element.

NO WORLD ORDER

The only things that puncture the dullness are the moments of inspired, unintentional hilarity. At first, the economic system merely seems like a Swiss Social Democrat's wet dream of an economy: Superhigh tax rates cut corruption, increase revenues, make the population happy, raise the GNP, get the sitting party reelected with a 90 percent majority, and perhaps cure chilblains. That is, until your economy suddenly crashes for no discernable reason at all. Just when you think you have the game figured out, it upchucks on your budget window.

By far the most entertaining element of the game is the way it handles war, which is sort of like a drunk Kim Jung Il throwing darts at a map and deciding to invade *there*, *there*, aaaaand...*there*. India may suddenly invade, say, Morocco and then be joined by the allied forces of Taiwan, Argentina, and Luxembourg. Syria seems to invade Israel in almost every scenario, which, while plausible, becomes tedious as you keep expecting the great navy of Chad to show up. One bizarre scenario (there are nine plus a sandbox mode) challenges you to create a nuclear program for Canada of all places, which you can do without international relations suffering at all—in fact, they can improve.

A game with this much data floating around inside it needs careful programming to make sure all that information interacts in a logical way. *SuperPower 2* lacks that, despite its claims to be "the most realistic geopolitical simulator." Even if the programmers somehow organized all this information into a sensible pattern of cause and effect, the game would remain what it is: dry, repetitive, unintuitive, and—of course—very, very dull. **Thomas L. McDonald**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Long stretches of boredom punctuated by brief moments of implausibility.

The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie

At least it doesn't cost much

I may have had unreasonable expectations of *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* game, expecting it to make me laugh the way the movie made me laugh. I wasn't put off by the game's E for Everyone ESRB rating, because the movie and TV show are clearly E for Everyone, and I, age 32, often laugh just as much if not more than my youngest sister, age 4, at said show.

A patented SpongeBob move, the Wedgie Pull, makes its way from the TV right onto your computer screen! Kids, watch and learn.

Kristen Salvatore

Verdict ★★½☆☆

More cute than funny—unless you're seven.

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Blue Fang Games** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 733, 256MB RAM, 900MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 32MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Zoo Tycoon 2

Putting the "do little" in Dr. Doolittle

If only I could talk to the animals, I'd tell them to eat the visitors! Here's *your* shot. In *Zoo Tycoon 2*, you are responsible for making both your zoo guests and your animals happy. All this animal husbandry makes for a good potential educational tool for young children, giving them the opportunity to learn about various animals and their habits, environments, and needs, while a handy zookeeper icon available on each animal's panel provides the means of satisfying these needs. Although this does flatten the learning curve quite a bit, it's probably preferable to sifting through hundreds of pages of the "Zoopedia." And though some of the vocabulary and concepts in the game may be too advanced for its intended audience, *Zoo Tycoon 2* does a credible job of entertaining the player...for a little while.

The main problem with *Zoo Tycoon* is its lack of a fast-forward button: A single year of gameplay consumes a grand total of six hours. In challenge mode, this is a huge drawback, especially if you're trying to meet one of the photographic challenges. In order to take a picture of a camel using a scratching post, you must wait until the camel is dirty enough to itch. The monetary rewards for such inane tasks aren't usually worth the boredom, since you normally end up breaking even because you have to adopt the necessary animals and create the proper habitats first. If you're an aspiring photographer, this might be appealing, but for everyone else, it would be much more satisfying to take a nap while your revenue increases on its own.

Waiting for the giraffes to do something...anything....

The last thing you'll see before nodding off.

Campaigns feel like a similar waste of time. Although the different background stories are somewhat interesting, such as another zoo's failure to provide for its own animals, this mode is extended way beyond what's necessary. Unlocking a single extra feature like a flowered arch doesn't require you to complete just one scenario, but three, which generally takes four-plus hours of gameplay.

Even if you're not an artsy person, landscaping will soon become your favorite part of *Zoo Tycoon*. Construction is easy, though a tad costly—but that's OK, you can't go bankrupt unless you're deliberately trying. Creating pretty exhibits may seem time-consuming and difficult, but it is a decent enough way to pass time. As with most tycoon games—and *CGW* internships—when you're finished building, you only have two main choices: spend your time scooping poop or hire zookeepers and become obsolete. **Rebecca Gross**

Verdict ★★½☆☆

Might be good for a biology credit, but not much else.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Firaxis** GENRE: **Strategy/Minigame Compilation** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Sid Meier's Pirates!

Shiver yer timbers!

Just about the only thing missing is a lightsaber.

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

***Sid Meier's Pirates!* is like a Hollywood blockbuster: shallow and meaningless, but undeniably beautiful and fun. Though this remake of the '80s game classic is little more than a collection of minigames, the sum of its parts is addictively entertaining.**

A PRIVATEER'S LIFE FOR ME

The game's simple premise is the stuff of little boys' dreams: You get to pillage, plunder, rifle, and loot, and still save the day as the good guy. The story starts with you as a boy whose family has been scattered and ruined by the evil Marquis Montalban. Ten years later, you appear in the Caribbean with a hijacked ship, a small crew, and a quest for vengeance and fortune. The game's beautiful cartoonlike graphics reinforce the feeling of playing in a child's fantasy world. *Pirates!*' difficulty settings are scalable enough that even young children can play it.

Once you're in the game, there's very little structure. A scoring system tracks your accomplishments, but nothing stops you from sailing anywhere or attacking anyone you desire. However, most shipping belongs to one of the four European powers colonizing the region, and you'll earn their enmity if you attack. These powers control the ports where you can sell your booty, recruit new crew members, and find missions, so you'll need to keep at least one nation happy by becoming its privateer (i.e., legalized pirate) and attacking its enemies for favor and profit. As your status increases, you'll receive benefits like free ship repairs in the ports of your patron.

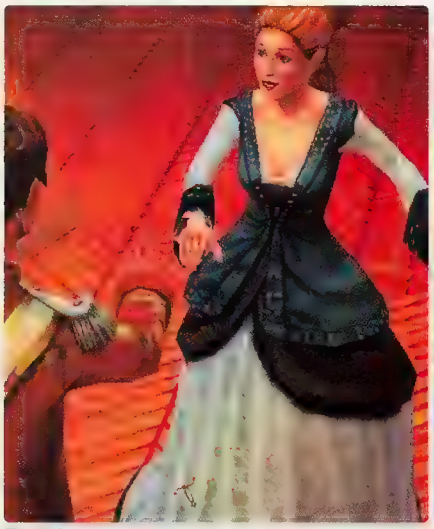
Once you've enough fame, you can romance a governor's daughter. The difficulty of the courtship depends on her "beauty" rating, which seems directly proportional to her bust size. The romance plays out through a series of Baroque dances, rhythm games where you perform steps in sync with the music. Do well and the lady will fall for you and lavish you with gifts such as treasure maps. These dances are fun and easily the most original part of the game.

A game of pirates and Indians.

Duels are intense and involve plenty of derring-do like swinging around on the masts or fighting at the edge of a plank.

PILFER, FILCH, AND SACK

There's not much money in trading, so you must fight to seize the real fortunes. To



By the game's parameters, this "attractive" girl's cleavage needs to double in size to qualify as "beautiful."

No one dies in *Pirates!*—they just fall a lot.

attack an enemy ship, you simply sail up to it and fight. Ship-to-ship combat is simple and elegant, with all of your actions controlled through the number pad. Despite the simplicity of control, combat takes into account factors such as wind, ship maneuverability, crew size, and even ammunition type. These factors keep combat interesting without being overly complicated. While you can sink the enemy ships by exchanging broadsides, there is little profit in mutual destruction. To actually plunder the enemy, you must board the other ship.

Boarding actions are decided by duels with the enemy captain. The size of each side's crew as well as weapons and special equipment determine how quickly each character can attack or defend. With each successful attack, you push your adversary back until he falls off the ship. These fights are intense and involve plenty of derring-do like swinging around on the masts or fighting at the edge of a plank. Once you defeat the enemy captain, you can capture his ship.

In addition to sea battles, there are other minigames like a "sneaking" sequence for getting into enemy towns and turn-based land battles in which you attack enemy ports outright. These aren't bad, but they're a bit slow and not nearly as entertaining as sword fights or ship battles.

As your journey progresses, you'll also acquire clues to the locations of your missing family and treasures. You find them by going onto dry land with a landing party and comparing the terrain to landmarks drawn on your maps. This essential part of the game takes too long and is as exciting as a game of *Where's Waldo?*

MARAUD, DESPOIL, AND HIJACK SOME MORE

In a full game of *Pirates!* you'll repeat these disparate components ad nauseam. As time passes, your character will age and his abilities decline. After a few decades of terrorizing the Spanish Main, you may want to retire and tally up your accomplishments. After finding lost cities and rescuing fair maidens, this ending is rather anticlimactic.

Your pirate fleet can contain up to eight ships, though only the flagship fights.

Though most of the minigames are short and fun enough that you'll probably find yourself saying "Just one more battle" often, you might eventually wish for a slightly deeper game. There is some replayability since you can change your character's special skills or national allegiance, but the missions and goals are too generic for this to make much of a difference. A bit more variety in the missions, more action during the treasure hunts, and the option for a bit more strategic depth (like running your own pirate town) would have been nice.

Even with these minor problems, *Pirates!* never loses its appeal. The simplicity of the gameplay and charm of the presentation are happy reminders of a more innocent age when games were just fun for kids rather than targets of congressional hearings. **Di (Yo-Ho) Luo**

An agile sloop sails circles around a Spanish galleon.

Verdict ★★★★½

A stylish and entertaining game that's appealing to both adults and children.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Frontier** GENRE: **Sim** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 733, 128MB RAM (256MB for Windows XP), 32MB videocard, 600MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

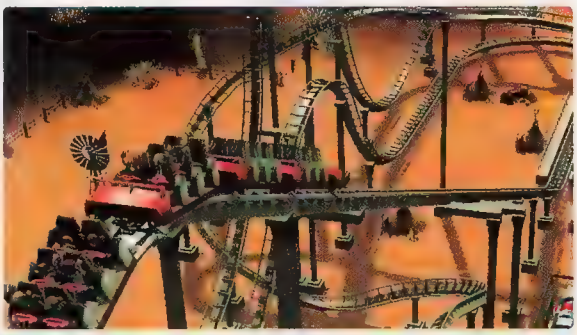
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3

RollerCoaster Tycoon finally gets a true sequel

From a fan's perspective, *RollerCoaster Tycoon 2* was more like *RollerCoaster Tycoon 1.5* since it changed precious little. That isn't a bad thing in itself considering Chris Sawyer's fresh and addictive design, but it did make the game feel like a bit of a rip-off. *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* stands as the true—and worthy—follow-up to the original hit, recasting the entire 2D game in a 3D mold while retaining the basic gameplay.

Visually, the developers at Frontier have yanked the game into the 21st century with remarkable skill. The 3D rides, peeps (park customers), landscapes, and the rest look terrific, and the rotating, tilting, and zooming perspectives quickly become essential elements in effective park design. Thanks to several flexible camera-control options, you can finally see things from all sides, even from inside a ride with a first-person camera. This last feature is more than just eye candy: You often get a real feel for the effectiveness of an attraction by riding it, and you also get to appreciate the look of your park from the eyes of your customers.

All of these changes have been integrated without upsetting any of the game's conventions. Veteran players will find themselves in familiar territory, researching attractions, hiring staff, expanding the park, and monitoring the reactions of the peeps. The main additions are depth and ease. There are plenty of new options, with a more open campaign; a sandbox mode; and scenario, peep, coaster, building, and park editors. There's even a fairly complex editor for creating custom fireworks displays set to music.



The roller-coaster designer benefits greatly from the new perspective—it's easier to make track alignments when you can see the setup from different angles.

Peeps have many of the same reactions, pleasures, and dislikes as their ancestors, but they now break down into more easily distinguished herds: groups of friends, kids, older people, and other demographics, all drifting toward different attractions. A lot of effort has gone into giving them each a distinct appearance and personality, but in the end, their prime function remains to act as a barometer of the park's failures and successes. And no matter how good the park is, someone is always bitching about something.

The game did ship with some bugs, such as the occasional disappearing object and discombobulated peep, but there were few problems overall. Even with a completely new engine, the core *RCT* formula remains intact and as strong as ever. **Thomas L. McDonald**

Verdict ★★★★☆

The 2D classic is given a wonderful 3D face-lift.

PUBLISHER: **Nobilis** DEVELOPER: **City Interactive** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700MHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 650MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Space Interceptor: Project Freedom

Fly me to the moon

Looking at the screenshots, you'd think that this game is the next *Freelancer* or *Wing Commander*. Well, kind of. Just strip out all those cinematics, simplify the interface, and seriously dumb down the game mechanics. Cause to complain? Not when *Space Interceptor* costs only 20 bucks.

Despite quite competent and even impressive radio-chatter from wingmates, steering me like "we've got a new ace on our hands," this is no swashbuckling space simulator. Space interceptor is a straight-up shooter. There's no trade, no diplomacy, no [illegible]—or helper-looking-over-your-shoulder—or helper looking-over-your-shoulder

"Go on, kid. Let's blow this thing and go home!"

[illegible] Interceptor is a space [illegible] **Dave Salvator**

Verdict ★★★☆☆

A streamlined, bargain-basement space shooter.

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **Codemasters** GENRE: **Arcade Soccer** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 3GB install, 64MB videocard**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Hotseat (2-4 players)**

Manchester United Soccer 2005

Oooh Ahhh Cantona

I should probably state up front that I'm a Chelsea fan. However, rooting for Roman Abramovich's all-stars doesn't prevent me from appreciating the over-the-top Manchester United love going on in this game. From the unlockable photos of United stars to the virtual stadium tour, this game is basically an excuse to revel in Red Devil nostalgia while playing what can only be described as bare-bones football. The graphics are good enough that you can recognize all your favorite stars, but the gameplay is not only less sophisticated but also far less soccer-like than either of the two serious alternatives on the market.

The heart of the game—as is to be expected—is United worship, and you can even create your own player in career mode and earn skill points to improvehim as you progress. You can alsoearn points to unlock various United memorabilia. It's perhaps a borderline purchase at its budget price, but for the same amount you could buy a few United fan magazines and start saving for your copy of *FIFA* or *Winning Eleven*. If thereis one thing United fans could learn from their favorite club, it's good financial management. **Bruce Geryk**

If you don't recognize this face, don't even think about buying this game.

The heart of the game is United worship.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
Feel the love, or just watch it on TV

PUBLISHER: **SSV** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** RATING: **R16** | **7** | REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder

Tenacious D

Rolling Thunder, the second standalone expansion for *Blitzkrieg*, doesn't thrill with innovation. In fact, aside from some gameplay tweaks, it's almost indistinguishable from the previous expansion, *Burning Horizon*—only instead of putting you in the shoes of the Desert Fox, it has you doing your best to out, or for him as General Patton.

Like previous iterations of *Blitzkrieg*, many recent building or resource-gathering titles. You're expected to complete the task-at-hand with your starting troops and (very) occasional reinforcements. This can be a fair-ness as *Rolling Thunder*'s AI is adept at setting up counterattacks, and you'll be hard-pressed to defend stretched enemy lines without careful planning (or, more often than not, reloading). Unlike a lot of RTS games, there are no secret "shortcuts" around enemy lines. The AI's shifts and unlimited ammo at most times, provide much of the game's challenge.

Not everything becomes a problem once you figure out that every defender will never, ever move from your position unless forced or killed. So artillery units, for example, can simply stand out of range and annihilate a whole corner of the battlefield. Using your tanks and infantry to clear the map of enemy units is a tedious affair, especially in the campaign's later missions.

Thankfully, the core of *Rolling Thunder* is solid, and if you don't expect the revolutionary you'll be in for some hardcore tactical gameplay. Because of the combat model's extreme realism, most battles, like those of so many RTS titles, are pointless. On top of this, the developers have incorporated a few changes (like optional objectives and navigated infantry gameplay) that enhance the gameplay and generally make the game

In the end, though, this expansion still feels a bit rehashed. The graphics (which weren't exactly scintillating even when the original shipped in the summer

look positively ★★★ when compared to such recent eye candy as *Point of War*. Still, if you like *Blitzkrieg*'s tactical-oriented gameplay, *Rolling Thunder* delivers the same thing in with slightly more challenging play. **Eric Neigher**

Verdict ★★★☆☆
Just like the last *Blitzkrieg*. No, really.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EA L.A.** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.2GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 4G install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-8 players)**

The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth

An RTS spectacle in the house that Jackson built

Gaming and Hollywood spend a fair amount of time fumbling around with each other. They know they belong together, but they're not quite sure how. Like two kids in the back of a car, they tend to embarrass themselves and regret it afterwards. But when things fall into place, there's nothing quite like the delight of sloppy imperfect moments, like EA's *Battle for Middle-earth*, a not-so-great game that almost manages transcendence due to how well it captures the look and feel of Peter Jackson's epic adaptations.

Ding! Uruk-hai crossbow troops level up.

FELLOWSHIP OF THE GAMES

There are some great concepts at work here, almost all of them borrowed. You get the leadership bonuses and global weather effects from *Warlords: Battlecry*, the group control and unit upgrades from *Dawn of War*, and the city-building from *Kohan*. Then there's the stuff the development team carried over from its last game, *Command & Conquer: Generals*—the streamlined resource management, the unit veterancy, the way cavalry rides over infantry like Chinese Battlemaster tanks squashing GLA rebels, and the late-game übernuke powers. Perhaps the only unique element is the way each player lays down bits of terrain that favor his units, turning the map into a patchwork quilt of good and evil ground.

Each of the four sides has its own style, although the system of tech upgrades doesn't allow much variety for any given side (the variety comes from the way you climb the trees of good or evil powers). Mordor spits out hordes of free orcs, Isengard is a slash-and-burn economic powerhouse, Rohan relies on its cavalry, and Gondor is a cornucopia of wealth and allies. Each side also has its own cast of familiar heroes, ranging from Boromir to the Witch-King of Angmar.

Perhaps the most dramatic gameplay difference here is the way the sides are nudged into offensive and defensive roles; the good races are given nearly impenetrable walls around their starting cities, while the evil races are allowed armies twice as large as those the good races have. This is the kind of asymmetry that makes a game interesting—but the single-player campaigns lose a lot of this nuance and instead focus on lushly scripted missions.

MAYBE IT'S IN *THE SILMARILLION*

BFME comes together nicely and has a tightly controlled design. Unfortunately, a lot of the dynamics are tucked under the hood. For instance, do you research fire arrows for +15 damage or recruit Faramir for a +100 percent damage bonus? How much armor does any given unit have? What's better, Uruk-hai or Gondorian soldiers? This scant information is presented almost apologetically, in either tiny fleeting windows or the corner of the screen, as if to stay out of the way of the graphics.

The Army of the Dead is breaking oaths and taking names.

Balrog vs. bird.

Then there's the slippery unit control, which encourages the feeling that you're only marginally in command here. There's no way to hold your infantry back to let your archers soften up the enemy. Cavalry seem to be literally chomping at the bit to throw themselves into even the most stalwart pike defenses. Gandalf is happy to rush to his death by wading into a sea of orcs and whacking away with his staff. There are no A.I. settings or formations.

However, there's something to be said for giving yourself over to the way the battles splay out of control and just sort of happen. On the one hand, *BFME* wants to make you think it's about leveling your units, upgrading them, and keeping them alive. On the other hand, the game is built like a classic meat-grinder RTS in which you're riding the ebb and flow of armies being crushed and rebuilt.

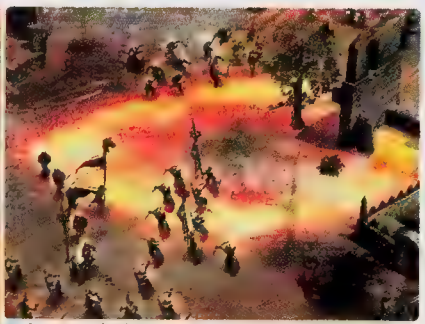
In any case, the loosey-goosey gameplay is secondary to the immersive experience that *BFME* creates. The artwork, the dark palette, the animation, the 3D models, the sound, the music: Together they present a pitch-perfect re-creation of Jackson's spectacular battle scenes. This is, in a way, the best way to use a movie license. Remind us what it was like seeing it for the first time. Tickle awake that sense of awe by dropping us into familiar tableaus that make us mutter to ourselves, "Wow, this really looks good...." When you do that well enough, it doesn't really matter when we lose a bunch of Rohirrim to a cave troll for lack of paying attention. Because, after all, this is—first and foremost—*The Lord of the Rings*. The real-time strategy stuff is almost incidental. **Tom Chick**

Verdict ★★★★☆

A decent RTS that makes great use of a movie license.

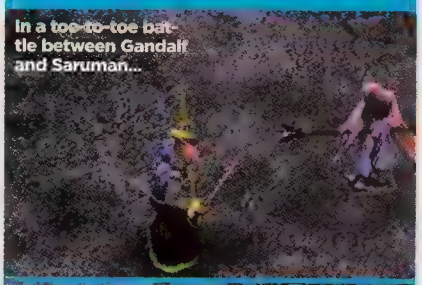
Either Mordor is invading or the circus is in town.

The Isengard welcoming committee arrives at Rohan.



Sauron playing peek-a-boo with elven archers.

WHO WOULD WIN...?



In a toe-to-toe battle between Gandalf and Saruman...

...Gandalf is victorious every time.

We pitted heroes against each other to test whether *Battle for Middle-earth* was realistic. In a toe-to-toe match, Gandalf beat Saruman every time. Lurtz used his Cripple ability to pin Boromir and shoot him full of arrows. The three nazgul always beat the three core fellowship members, Legolas, Aragorn, and Gimli. We were concerned when the Witch-King always won against Gandalf, until we used Gondor's White Wizard power—Gandalf the White can use a single blast of Istari Light to instantly fry the Witch-King. Purists will be disappointed, however, that Eowyn doesn't stand a chance against a nazgul. And if you're wondering, Merry won two out of three Merry-versus-Pippin hobbit fights.

Tech

One kick-ass computer to rule them all...

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12TH ANNUAL

ULTIMATE GAMING MACHINE

Clash of the Titans

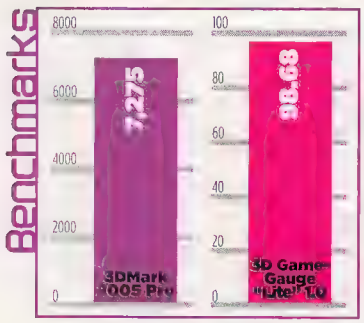
This should have been the worst UGM competition in history; incredibly, it was quite the opposite.

In years past, boatloads of PC manufacturers jumped at the opportunity to show off their PC-building prowess in the UGM competition. But this year, just half the usual number of contestants battled for the Ultimate Gaming Machine title. To add insult to injury, two of our past UGM favorites, high-end gaming-rig specialists Falcon Northwest and Alienware, withdrew from the UGM after Intel forbade them from overclocking the company's CPUs.

But the introduction of Nvidia's NForce4 chipset motherboards, the Nvidia-based technology SLI that links two graphics cards are linked together as one to net the fastest framerates possible, and a slew of the fastest machines on the planet turned this year's UGM into a heated battle with, of all things, the winner finally determined by support alone. Brace yourself and raise your credit limit because this is gaming on steroids, with blistering fps scores, home-theater-quality audio, the coolest cases, and all the bells and whistles—and the price tags to match.

Raphael Liberatore

Photography by Arnold Tiosejo



FINAL SCORE: **4.00**

VOODOOPC **RAGE SLI**

Retaining the title

VoodooPC once again reigns supreme, helped by its reputation for quality performance and excellent support. But it was a tough battle. The newcomer, Maingear, leapt into the fray with a legacy air-cooled AGP system with wicked-fast performance that almost dethroned the king. But VoodooPC was ready, testing fresh waters with the first OEM SLI NForce4 chipset system ever built.

The Rage SLI not only scored the highest 3DGG test result (due in part to the AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU and NForce4 chipset–based PCI Express motherboard from Asus) but also registered off-the-charts 3DMark05 benchmark scores. This VoodooPC system was the only rig to surpass the century mark in fps with our 3DGG *Halo*, *Doom 3*, and *Far Cry* benchmarks, proving fastest across the board even as the Maingear hung in tightly. Well, except for the *Painkiller* bench test, where it choked for some reason. VoodooPC gained another edge through the inclusion of an NEC MultiSync 22-inch CRT monitor, which allowed the system to run all "Test of Pain" benchmarks and look good while doing it.

But with speed came a price: This rig's stability score was one of the lowest, with hard crashes aplenty—a major reason Maingear came so close to victory. However, as with any new technology, initial setbacks and future optimizations are normal growing pains. By the time you read this, many of the stability issues we had will most likely be gone.

And you can credit that rosier future in part to VoodooPC's warranty and support service. VoodooPC is the only UGM entrant to have its very own game-download support page called Game Doctor. Coupled with a system- and device-download service, Game Doctor provides a one-year license to access all of these services and more. Maingear is still sprouting its wings, and its meager online and support services cannot compete—which definitely helped push VoodooPC into the winners' circle.

With top-notch, cutting-edge performance components, great build quality, classy looks, and awesome support, the Rage SLI pulls off a repeat victory for VoodooPC as UGM champion. You just cannot find a better gaming experience than with VoodooPC. Can anyone say threepeat?

WHY?
Two rocket-fast Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT videocards running your games at Mach 3. Need we say more?

FINAL SCORE: **3.90**

MAINGEAR TYPE 3—VJ EDITION

The new kid on the block almost knocks out the reigning UGM champ

Maingear's Type 3—VJ Edition system arrived ready for a fight. Yeah, the system name lacks some pizzazz, but who cares when its air-cooled system scores are at (or near) the top of almost every category? The NEC MultiSync LCD offers some of the sharpest image quality I've seen in any LCD; however, it couldn't handle higher resolutions, which could have cost Maingear dearly if our "Test of Pain" had turned out to be the deciding factor.

Still, Maingear has much to be proud of, building both a solid performer and a stylish looker. Interestingly, the Type 3 pretty much borrows the same balance of quality and performance demonstrated by last year's UGM champ, a VoodooPC. Maingear makes no bones about overclocking its system, and with the AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 and ATI Radeon X800 XT dialed in for speed, top scores were a sure bet, especially with a gig of Corsair TwinX DDR RAM and twin Western Digital Raptor SATA hard drives in RAID 0 spinning at an incredible 10,000 rpm. It even bested the UGM champ in *UT2004* and *Painkiller* benchmark scores. The second highest 3DMark05 score is nothing to sneer at, either.

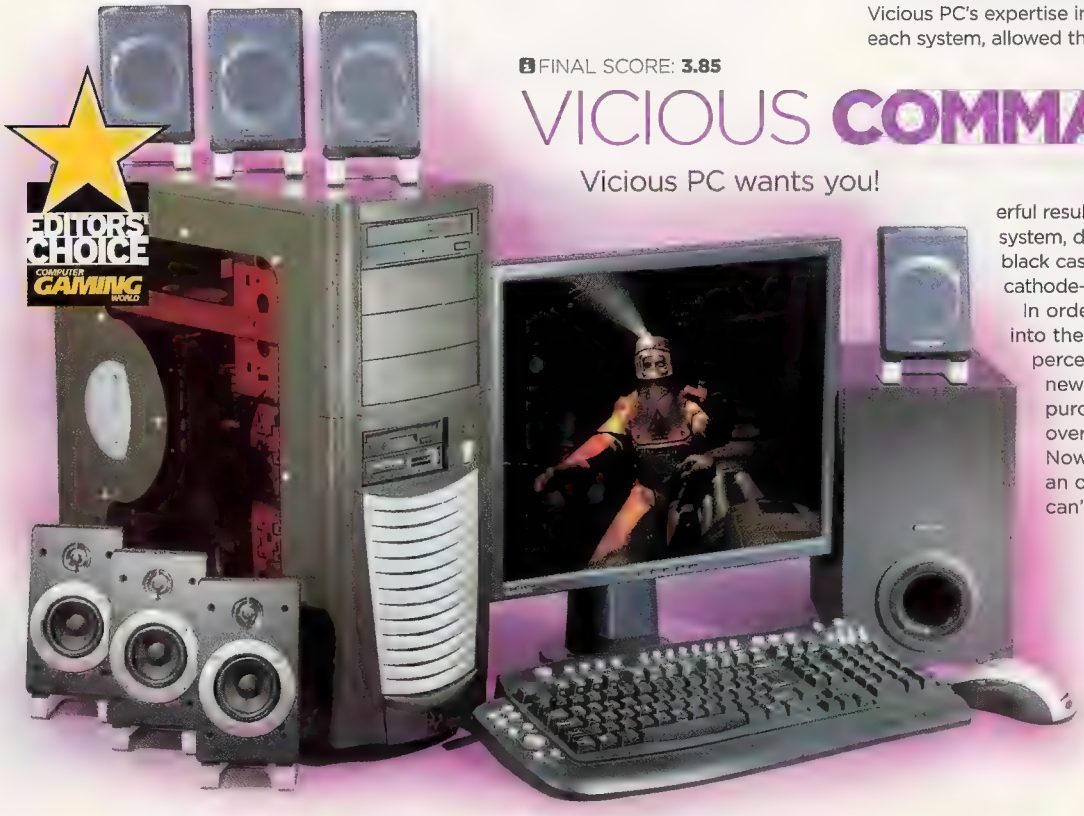
Maingear's online support is a little on the light side, paling in comparison to VoodooPC's—it's just way too meager for an UGM-caliber system. I'm willing to forgive that for a gaming rig this excellent...but not enough to crown it the winner.

WHY?
Maingear's real claim to fame comes from custom paint jobs that would make any Lamborghini enthusiast drool. The Type 3's "speed yellow" paint shines like a beacon in a sea of gray and black casings

FINAL SCORE: **3.85**

VICIOUS COMMANDO

Vicious PC wants you!



Just a few short years ago, Vicious PC arrived on the PC-building scene with a chip on its shoulder and an unyielding will to create wicked-fast gaming systems. Its drive and commitment bore fruit, earning the company our coveted UGM award in 2002. Today, Vicious PC continues to crank out gaming systems that can rumble with the best of them, and its AMD Athlon 64–based Commando system lives up to the reputation of previous Vicious PC high-end systems.

Packed with dual 10K rpm Raptor HDDs in RAID 0, the Commando stormed out of the box ready to take out the competition; it scored high in almost every benchmark test and garnered the third-highest 3DGG scores of the group. The combination of the AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 processor, fast Kingston RAM, and the GeForce 6800 Ultra videocard, coupled with Vicious PC's expertise in fine-tuning and optimizing each system, allowed the Commando to turn out powerful results. At 49 decibels, it's a quiet system, dressed up in a tricked-out black case sporting mod lights and cathode-ray tubes.

In order to insert more Commandos into the field, Vicious PC is offering 10 percent off and free shipping on new PC purchases over $1,500. Now that's an offer you can't refuse.

WHY?
Free shipping and 10 percent off? Thank you, sir. May I have another!

FINAL SCORE: **3.75**

VELOCITY MICRO GAMER'S EDGE 64

The word "velocity" is there for a reason

Velocity Micro's ambitious plan for dominating the UGM with a hot new SLI NForce4–based system was squashed just days prior to our entry deadline when its machine imploded. Instead of calling it quits, Velocity Micro regrouped, designed, built, and then rushed its Gamer's Edge 64 to us in record-breaking time. It turned out to be an amazing feat of production and QA, and when you consider how well-designed, powerful, and stable this last-minute UGM system is, it might be a miracle.

The Gamer's Edge 64 sports one of the better aluminum case designs of the UGM contest, with rock-solid construction, a larger than typical footprint for messing around inside, and nifty caster wheels for moving the machine back and forth with ease.

Core performance oozes from the Gamer's Edge 64's AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU, a pair of Western Digital 10,000 rpm HDDs in RAID 0, and EVGA's Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra Extreme Edition. Except for the DVD optical drive's disk-ejection issues, this system performed like a winner across the board, posting a 3DMark05 score that ranked third among the UGMs. Add an impressive top-rated *Painkiller* benchmark result of 55.51fps, and the Gamer's Edge 64 performs as sharply as it looks. With impeccable quality, support, and noteworthy performance, Velocity Micro has awesome potential for winning next year's UGM contest, especially if it can get the price down.

WHY?
The Velocity Signature Aluminum Case sports optional caster wheels and comes bundled with *Doom 3*, *Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield*, *Far Cry*, *Tomb Raider*, *Nero*, PowerDVD, and *WordPerfect Office*

FINAL SCORE: **3.67**

HYPERSONIC CYCLONE XE

This python comes ready to strike

The Cyclone XE Python—powered by an AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 processor in an Asus A8V Deluxe mobo with a VIA K8T800 Pro chipset—is a solid choice for any gamer looking for superior performance and style. Sadly, for the second year, Hypersonic's rig arrived unable to boot (probably because of extreme overclocking).

One quick call to Hypersonic's exemplary support system and this rig was churning out 3DGG benchmark scores in the above-average performance range. The *Halo* 93.88fps and especially the *Painkiller* 52.98fps results were very close to the system scores from Vicious PC and Velocity Micro—not too surprising considering its components. This is a pleasantly quiet machine, registering a happily hushed 48 decibels, due in part to Hypersonic's Silencer Package.

The Cyclone XE's guts are housed in a Reflexxion series Sonicwave aluminum alloy case with ColorShift green- and purple-spotted paint. With a matching keyboard and mouse, painted in layers of car paint and clear coat, waxed and polished like a show car, Hypersonic shows how sweet a system can look.

WHY?
The green and purple ColorShift paint scheme is a cool-factor 5 for fancy-pants types who like the glitz.

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FINAL SCORE: **3.42**

CYBERPOWER TITANIUM 9000 SUPREME

And the best-dressed award goes to...

Instead of going with AMD's amazing new FX-55 processor like almost everyone else, CyberPower elected to stick with Intel guts: a Pentium 4 3.46GHz Extreme Edition CPU clocking in at an amazing 1066MHz frontside bus and a PCI Express D925XECV2 motherboard. Add a pair of Western Digital Raptor SATA hard drives in RAID 0, a Maxtor 250MB SATA for backup, 1GB of overclocked Corsair DDR2 RAM, and a Gigabyte Radeon X800 XT videocard, and you'd expect the seemingly muscular Titanium to blast through the competition. Rather, it came in dead last, with meager *Doom 3* benchmarks of 47.5fps. This might be due to two missteps: First, Intel is just getting stomped by the AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 in the current processor wars; second, the overclocked videocard broke and had to be replaced, meaning it wound up running 3DGG at baseline performance settings.

However, there's a bright side, literally. The NZXT Nemesis case and front panel may be a little clunky for those looking for the more classic or sophisticated look of Maingear, Velocity Micro, or VoodooPC, but if you're a fan of giant robots in the *MechWarrior* or even *Bionicles* vein, then you'll appreciate the snazzy X-Nemesis case with its glowing cathode-ray tube, mod lighting, and the readily accessible, very cool LCD temperature controller. Nice.

Despite the disappointing overall results from this system, it managed decent *Far Cry* and *Splinter Cell* bench tests, and CyberPower included a very good Viewsonic Q190MB 19-inch LCD monitor along with free shipping and a 5 percent discount. If you want your PC to look like a cyborg and are low on dinero, then the Titanium may still be worth a look.

WHY?
Hate to part with anything? You'll love the two Raptors in RAID 0 and a Maxtor 250GB SATA HDD for backup. It's hard-drive heaven.

FINAL SCORE: **3.33**

IBUYPOWER TITANIUM

Buying power

With an Intel Pentium 4 3.46GHz processor and D925XECV2 PCI Express motherboard under the hood, this screamer is definitely priced to move. So what is IBuyPower's secret for the inexpensive Titanium PC? How does the company get away with underbidding the competition? Who cares when it can deliver screaming systems at such low prices?

Looking at the Titanium's game performance, it's interesting how it closely matches the comparatively underperforming CyberPower rig—interesting, but not so surprising since both use similar Pentium-based PCI Express systems. As consolation, IBuyPower's Titanium did rip through our 3DGG *Unreal Tournament* benchmark at a blistering 108.47fps for the fastest score. Since the Titanium uses Kingston DDR2 RAM at 533MHz, striped WD Raptor 10K rpm HDDs, and an ATI Radeon X800 XT videocard, I'm not surprised.

Opening up the IBuyPower case revealed a tangled mess of wire—it made pulling out the RAM modules unpleasant. Multimedia is a Titanium highlight, with a Pioneer dual-layer DVD-ROM drive, an Audigy 2 ZS, and a Gigaworks 7.1 speaker system cranking *Doom 3* or your favorite reference DVDs.

WHY?
IBuyPower offers one of the best warranties in the business, which might be worth a slight performance drop. The support portion of its site, however, makes for a less than stellar Warranty and Support score.

MAKING SENSE OF ULTIMATE GAMING MACHINES

The winning combination

Considering our rather precarious start, the Ultimate Gaming Machine 2005 contest turned into a rather stirring competition. VoodooPC once again displayed its championship caliber, with Maingear and Vicious PC nipping at its heels. After putting seven machines through their paces with both synthetic and 3D GameGauge real-world gaming benchmarks, as well as assessing stability issues, style points, ergonomics, upgradeability, and warranty and support services, we landed on VoodooPC with its top-performing SLI-capable PCI Express NForce4 chipset and FX-55 processor as the winner. Even though Maingear and Vicious PC performed extremely well, and Velocity Micro and Hypersonic's top-notch systems made a decent showing, the ultimate gaming rig honors went to the Rage SLI from VoodooPC for all the right reasons. And VoodooPC's exemplary service and support offerings are icing on the cake, making it even more deserving of praise.

In the end, systems like the IBuyPower and CyberPower with Intel-based guts just couldn't compete with the faster AMD Athlon 64 FX-55-based systems and their awesome benchmark scores. Most of the UGM entries also went with LCD monitors as their preferred choice for gaming. Only the winner, the Rage SLI, used a CRT, and the quality and performance of its NEC MultiSync monitor showed.

Even though picking an Ultimate Gaming Machine winner can be a stressful exercise, it also turned out to be a kick. Having a detailed set of parameters really helped eliminate some of the uncertainty of picking past UGM winners. No matter how crazy things got, I would do this contest as often as the technology of computer gaming expands, bringing us each new performance nugget. Things move quickly, but gaming on the fastest system possible is a goal worth pursuing. ⊠ **Raphael Liberatore**

In the end, systems with Intel-based guts couldn't compete with the faster AMD Athlon 64 FX-55-based systems.

GEEK SPEAK Graphic mumbo-jumbo decoded

SLI

Nvidia's new Scalable Link Interface takes advantage of the higher-bandwidth PCI Express bus architecture by doubling up on GPUs (x2) to add increased gaming performance for blistering-fast frames per second. It also features Nvidia NForce4 MCPs (media and communications processors) for additional computing power.

HYPERTRANSPORT

Designed to increase communication speeds between integrated circuits and used as an integrated high-performance I/O bus for piping USB, PCI, PCI Express, FireWire, audio, video, and other embedded components in a computer system. AMD invented this high-speed, low-latency, point-to-point link, which is built into the processor or CPU.

ANTIALIASING

A software technique for decreasing the amount of "jaggies," the serrated lines seen on images, generally at the edges. Jaggies crop up because the monitor lacks the resolution to create a smoother line. Though it creates a potential for fuzzy images, antialiasing focuses on reducing the lack of drawing smooth lines through the use of intermediate gray or color shading.

Frames per second is a unit of measurement defining the amount of video information a videocard can churn out. Faster frames basically equate to smoother images and animation on the monitor.

How We Tested

After making sure all seven contenders met our Ultimate Gaming Machine qualifications (first and foremost that they came in under our $6,000 ceiling), testing began. Final scores were an aggregate of individual scores weighted thusly: Performance (40%), Stability (20%), Style and Ergonomics (10%), Upgradeability (10%), Warranty and Support (10%), and Price (10%).

Performance scoring looked at the average fps results of actual benchmark tests derived from both synthetic and real-world applications. We chose 3DMark05 as our synthetic benchmark, while our very own benchmarking suite, 3D GameGauge 4.0 (which draws from a brilliant list of A-list shooters and action games), was employed to determine each system's overall real-world performance. We ran each at 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled and in-game settings maxed. Due to the limitations of the LCDs included with most UGM systems, we were only able to run a "Test of Pain" benchmark (1600x1200, 4x AA, and 8x AF) on two contestants. Other factors influencing system performance scores include sound quality, read/write, and system noise-level tests.

The number of crashes or glitches each machine experienced was noted and used to determine the Stability score. The biggest factor determining a system's stability this year seemed to be the presence of overclocking.

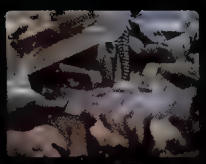
An admittedly subjective assessment of a system's design, build quality, and desk footprint decided our Style and Ergonomics score. When evaluating Upgradeability, we looked both at whether a system was upgradeable and how accessible the interior was.

For Warranty and Support, we evaluated each computer manufacturer's online retail shop and noted system configuration options, including optional software upgrade packages, and the ability to add or swap components or to make handy modifications. Notably, most systems came with comparable warranties, including extended warranty options in conjunction with standard offerings.

Finally, less expensive systems received a bonus for delivering under our mandated price point.

UGM: BY THE NUMBERS

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	VoodooPC Rage SLI	Maingear Type 3—VJ	Vicious Commando	Velocity Micro Gamer's Edge 64	Hypersonic Cyclone XE Python Limited Edition	CyberPower Titanium 9000 Supreme	IBUYPOWER Titanium
Price	$5,925	$4,490	$4,450	$5,319	$4,636	$3,149	$3,450
Operating System	MS Windows XP Pro	MS Windows XP Home	MS Windows XP Home	MS Windows XP Home	MS Windows XP Pro	MS Windows XP Pro	MS Windows XP Pro
CPU	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 w/Zalman heat sink	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 w/Zalman heat sink	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 w/Zalman heat sink	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 w/Zalman heat sink	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 w/Zalman heat sink	Intel Pentium P4 3.46GHz EE	Intel Pentium P4 3.46GHz EE
Motherboard	Asus A8NE PCI-E	Asus A8V Deluxe	MSI K8N Neo2 Platinum	Asus A8V Deluxe	Asus A8V Deluxe	Intel D925XECV2 PCI Express	Intel D925XECV2 PCI Express
Memory	2x 512GB Corsair PC3200 RAM	2x 512GB Corsair TwinX PC3200 RAM	2x 512MB Kingston HyperX PC3500 RAM	4x 512MB Corsair XMS PC3200 RAM	2x 512MB Corsair XMS DDR-550 TwinX RAM	2x 512MB Corsair PC5300 DDR2 RAM	2x 512MB Kingston 533MHz DDR2
Graphics Card	2x Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra PCI-E	ATI Radeon X800 XT VJ Modded Edition AGP	Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra 256MB AGP	EVGA Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra AGP	ATI Radeon X800 XT 256MB AGP	Gigabyte Radeon X800 XT 256MB PCI E	ATI Radeon X800 XT 256MB PCI E
HDD Interface	SATA RAID 0	SATA RAID 0	SATA RAID 0	SATA RAID 0	SATA RAID 0	SATA RAID 0	SATA RAID 0
HDD (make/size/ interface)	160GB Seagate Barracuda NCQ SATA	74GB WD Raptor 10K rpm SATA HDD	74GB WD Raptor 10K rpm SATA HDD	74GB WD Raptor 10K rpm SATA HDD	74GB WD Raptor 10K rpm SATA HDD	74GB WD Raptor 10K rpm SATA HDD	74GB WD Raptor 10K rpm SATA HDD
Secondary Storage Device	NA	NA	NA	200GB WD WD2000 JB 7200 rpm ATA HDD	NA	Maxtor 250MB 7200 rpm SATA HDD	NA
Case	Voodoo MESA Forced Air Chassis	Maingear	Vicious PC Full Winner Black w/window	LX-W Velocity Micro Signature Aluminum Case w/window	Reflexxion Series Sonicwave	NZXT-Nemesis EE Aluminum midtower	Radmax Samura Gaming Case
Power Supply (wattage)	Voodoo 600 watt Noisetaker 2.0	OCZ PowerStream 520 watt	PS ATX525UL 525 watt	Enermax 500 watt	Enermax 550 watt	Thermaltake Pure-Power 480 watt	Enermax 600 watt
Optical Drive 1	Pioneer DVR-108 Dual Layer DVD-RW	Sony CD-RW	NEC DVD-RW ND-3500AG	16x Lite On DVD+/ -RW Dual Layer	NEC ND-3500 DVD+ -R/RW Dual Layer Burner	Sony 16x DVD-ROM	Pioneer DVR-108 Dual Layer DVD-RW
Optical Drive 2	NA	CDRW	NA	16x Lite On DVD/48x CD-RW Combo Drive	NA	Sony DWD-22A DVD+/ -RW Dual Layer Burner	16x Sony DVD-Rom
Misc Drives	Aluminum Card Reader	7-in-1 Card Reader	1.44 floppy drive and Flash Memory Card Reader	1.44 floppy drive	Combo 7-in-1 floppy drive and Digital Media Reader/Writer	Mitsumi 1.44 floppy drive / 6-in-1 Media Reader	6-in-1 Media Card Reader
Monitor	NEC MultiSync 22-inch CRT	NEC LCD1765	Viewsonic Optisync VP912b 19-inch LCD	Sharp LL-T2015B 20-inch LCD	Samsung 910T+ 19-inch LCD	Viewsonic Q190B 19-inch LCD	Viewsonic VP912b 19-inch LCD
Keyboard	Logitech MX-1000	Logitech Cordless MX Duo	MS Power Office 102	Microsoft Multimedia	Logitech Elite	Logitech MX Duo	Viewsonic Multimedia
Mouse	Logitech Elite	MX-700 Cordless	Microsoft Optical	Microsoft Optical	Logitech MX900 Bluetooth Optical Cordless	Logitech MX Duo	Viewsonic Optical
Soundcard	Creative Audigy 2 ZS	Creative Audigy 2 ZS	Creative Audigy 2 ZS	Creative Audigy 2 ZS	Creative Audigy 2 ZS	Creative Audigy 2 ZS	Creative Audigy 2 ZS
Speakers/ Headphones	Creative Gigaworks S750 THX 7.1	Plantronics DSP-500 Headphones	Creative Inspire 7700 7.1 / Cyber Acoustics AC-960 Headphones	Creative Gigaworks S750 THX 7.1	Creative Inspire 7700 7.1	Creative Inspire 7800 7.1	Creative Gigaworks S750 THX 7.1
Networking	Integrated Gigabit	Integrated Gigabit	Integrated Gigabit	Integrated Gigabit	Integrated Gigabit	Integrated Gigabit	Integrated Gigabit
Software	Recovery DVD	Recovery CD	Nero; PowerDVD	Restore DVD; Ulead Digital Creation Suite; Corel Word-Perfect Productivity Pack, Far Cry & Doom 3 game bundle	Recovery DVD; Counter-Strike, Joint Ops, Tome Raider, and Rainbow Six; Power DVD	Recovery CD; Microsoft Works; Power DVD; WinDVD Suite; Power Director; NTI DVD Maker	Nero; Power DVD
Miscellaneous	Fuel Software Value Suite; Excellent System Binder	Maingear offers performance tuning; Arctic Video Cooling Fan; System Binder	10 percent off and free shipping; Level 3 Typhoon Cooling System; System Binder	Case caster wheels; VideoCool Airflow System; Moderate 3D Tuning	ColorShift Python Edition paint job w/ matching keyboard and mouse	LCD Temperature Controller; 3x 120mm fans	Definitely upgrade mouse and keyboard
Warranty and Support Notes	Game Doctor Warranty	Standard one-year 24 hour and onsite support	2NET toll-free support and one-year onsite service	Three-year Velocity Care Support w/ emergency hours and onsite service	Three-year 24/7 toll-free tech support w/ onsite and lifetime support warranty	Three-year limited warranty and first-year onsite service	Three-year limited year iCare Deluxe 24/7 onsite warranty
3DMark05 Score	7,275	5,549	4,038	4,193	3,921	3,678	3,570
3DGG Score	98.68	90.03	88.64	81.02	79.53	64.6	65.25
Performance-Speed Score	5	4.5	4	4	3.5	3	3
Stability Score	2.5	3	4	3.5	2.5	2.5	4
Style Score	5	4.5	3.5	4.5	5	3	3
Upgradeability-Accessibility Score	4	3	4	4	4	3	2.5
Warranty and Support Score	5	2	3.5	4.5	4	4	3.5
Price Score	1	4	4	2	3	5	4
SCORE	4.00	3.90	3.85	3.75	3.67	3.42	3.33



Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

As good as it gets

You would think that working 80-hour weeks, gunning for ridiculously short deadlines, unpacking and repacking countless hardware boxes, dealing with cranky or flaky manufacturers, and feeling powerless as Intel hamstrings stalwarts like Falcon Northwest and Alienware in the UGM contest would make reviewing hardware for *CGW* a giant pain in the buttocks, right? On the contrary, I'm the luckiest computer geek alive. Seriously.

Just imagine for one moment getting first crack at test-driving the fastest gaming systems on the planet. Then imagine laying your hands on the first-ever Nvidia SLI NForce4 OEM PC in existence and using it to tear through *Doom 3* or *Half-Life 2* at blistering speeds with nary a hiccup in framerates. Or imagine blaring your favorite reference DVDs like *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Gladiator*, or *Lord of the Rings* in pure Dolby Digital surround sound because the supersonic UGM system you're testing uses an Audigy 2 ZS audio card with a sweet Cambridge SoundWorks Gigabit 7.2 speaker system. That rush alone makes this job worth every frustrating moment.

I recall my first experience with UGM, when Dave Salvator, with surprising patience even after getting his frag-happy rear and kicked by yours truly in our new *Unreal Tournament* benchmark, taught me the ins and outs of benchmarking PCs. He pretty much laid the foundation of what I know today about computers, and I thank him for that. I remember leaving *CGW*'s HQ daydreaming about how exciting it would be to write for *CGW* in a Tech editorial capacity. It's hard to believe I've come full circle, doing the UGM once again, only this time as *CGW*'s Tech Commando. ■ Raphael Liberatore

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Check Out

Inside

What's the average bra size of the American woman? Did that get your attention? I doubt it. In fact, I doubt most readers even realize this paragraph is usually here. So, the first 100 readers to e-mail us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject line "Check Out intro!" will be entered into a drawing to win the NZT Nemesis case shown on page 98 and some other cool schwag. If we receive fewer than 100 entries, then this will be the last time you'll see an intro paragraph here. How's that for a response to the will of the people?

Killer Rig

FX-55 Centurion

This month's Killer Rig is a no-holds-barred challenger to the retail rigs that competed for our coveted UGM award. Despite the top-notch components and seasoned PC-building pedigrees of our UGM contenders, our FX-55 Centurion system gave them a run for their money.

We began with a rather sleek midtower Cooler Master case but swapped out the underpowered 350-watt power supply in favor of the superquiet TWV PurePower 480-watt power source from Thermaltake. The well-insulated Centurion case, power-supply unit, and four chassis fans kept the noise at a minimal 49 decibels.

When building a superfast machine, the rule of thumb is to focus first on the CPU since it is the foundation of a rig's performance and endurance and then build outward from there with the best components possible. We chose AMD's new Athlon 64 FX-55 2.6GHz with a 1MB L2 cache 64-bit processor because, like the processors in many of our UGM entries, this puppy is begging to be overclocked.

For a rock-solid motherboard, we chose the MSI K8T Neo2 series motherboard with VIA's K8T800 Pro chipset to provide the backbone for our Killer Rig. Aside from the standard array of goodies, like SATA, Gigabit LAN, and dual-channel DDR RAM support, that come with the newer top-end mobos, the K8T800 comes with eight USB 2.0 ports and Realtek's ALC850 audio chip for 7.1 surround-sound output. Since we wanted to divert audio processing power from the CPU and mobo for the best possible low-latency processor load for gaming, we dropped a Creative Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro soundcard into the chassis for lightning-fast audio sampling. The Audigy Platinum Pro also sports an external I/O hub for hooking up the best PC speakers on the market for cranking pure DTS surround-sound movies—the Logitech Digital Z-5500 5.1 speaker system.

We then added two full gigs of Kingston's HyperX RAM, a RAID 0 striped array sporting two Seagate Barracuda 250GB SATA HDDs, and a dual-layer Mad Dog DVD burner. Final touches include Logitech's Wireless Duo keyboard matched with the company's newest optical mouse, the MX-1000. Finally, we decked out our rig with Philips' awesome HDTV-ready 23-inch LCD monitor that includes a built-in card reader. Interestingly, the soundcard, speakers, graphics card, and monitor plant us right smack in the middle of the home-theater convergence arena. How's that for getting your money's worth?

After loading Windows XP Pro with SP2 and polishing off the system with updated drivers, we tweaked the CPU FSB frequency, aspect ratio, and voltage using the BIOS settings and then overclocked the videocard with a third-party utility, which resulted in some impressive *Halo* and *Doom 3* scores, as well as high scores in everything else. Hmm...maybe next year the big boys will be fighting *CGW* for the UGM award. **Raphael Liberatore**

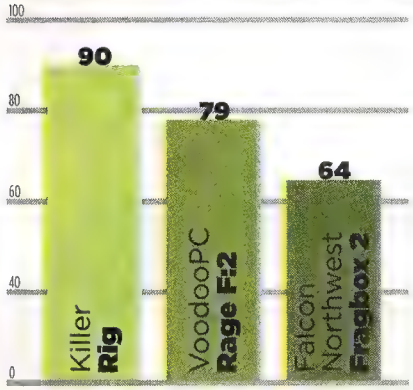
For a rock-solid motherboard, we chose the MSI K8T Neo2 series motherboard.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARNOLD TIOSEJO

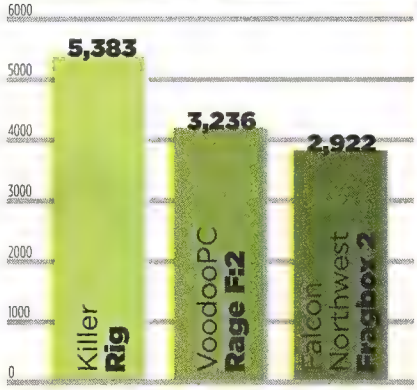
The Guts

	COMPONENT	PRICE
Operating system	Microsoft Windows XP Professional with SP2	$135
Case	Cooler Master Centurion CAC-T05 WWA aluminum midtower case with window panel	$85
Power supply	Thermaltake PurePower480W	$85
Processor (CPU)	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 2.6GHz, Socket 939, 1MB cache retail (with fan)	$990
Motherboard	MSI K8T Neo2 socket 939 motherboard with 7.1 audio, Gigabit LAN, RAID/Serial ATA	$85
Memory	Kingston HyperX KHX4300 4x 512 MB DDR memory x 4 (2GB total) $178 x 4	$712
Hard drive	2x Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 250GB HDD Serial ATA 7,200 rpm hard drive with 8MB buffer $135 x 2	$270
Graphics Processor	BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC with TV-out 256MB GDDR3 AGP8x graphics card	$599
DVD-ROM drive	Mad Dog MegaSTOR 16X Double Layer DVD3R3RW 6-in-1 internal drive	$119
Monitor	Philips Brilliance 230W5 HDTV-ready 23-inch LCD	$1,999
Keyboard	Logitech Duo MX Cordless keyboard	$50
Mouse	Logitech MX-1000 Wireless optical mouse	$70
Speakers	Logitech Digital Z-5500 5.1 speaker system	$270
TOTAL COST		$5,489

3DGame Gauge "Lite" 1.0



3DMark05



ALL TESTS RUN WITH 4X AA (ANTIALIASING) AND 8X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) TURNED ON UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

A-List

The latest and greatest gadgets you gotta get

Apple's iPod threw down a gauntlet: Make a sweeter-looking and more functional MP3 player. Done. But with the Zen Micro, Creative Labs has taken a page from Apple and origami'd that page into its own dope creation. Available in 10 candy colors, the Zen boasts an easy-to-read display and a teeny form-factor with a touch pad. You get 5GB to fill with data and tunes, and you can sync this baby up with *Outlook*. The identically priced iPod Mini stows only 4GB, and the Zen also offers a built-in FM tuner, the ability to record radio and voice as WAV files, and removable batteries—a real bonus on international flights.

It's neither small nor subtle, but the Nintendo DS is what gamers want. Its laundry list of features almost seems too good to be true at first: two screens (one is a PDA-like touch screen), 802.11b wireless capabilities, and Voice over IP. It has the horsepower of the Nintendo 64 and is backwards compatible with Game Boy games. It's not the most portable portable device around—think two GBA SPs rubber-banded together—but the two-screen gimmick pays off. We're already seeing imaginative titles like *Feel the Magic: XY/XX*, which has you furiously tapping the screen to throw up goldfish and literally blowing into the DS to blow out candles.

Too wedded to your iPod to even consider trading it in? Get more out of it with iPod Solio, coming soon to the U.S. This solar-powered charger means that as long as the weather is cooperating, your iPod won't run out of juice. More expensive than AA batteries? Yes, but it's better for the environment and, frankly, fricking cool. Also available: adapters that let you use the Solio to charge your cell phone.

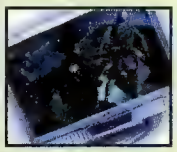
TECH REWIND

18 months of Tech scores at your fingertips

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Abit ICT-G MAX 3	09/03	★★★★☆
ABS Mayhem G1	05/04	★★★★☆
ABS Ultimate M5	09/03	★★★★☆
ABS Ultimate M6	07/04	★★★★☆
ABS Ultimate M8	06/03	★★★★☆
Actiontec 54 Mbps Wireless Cable/DSL Router	11/04	★★★★★
Alienware Aurora	01/04	★★★★★
Altec Lansing MX5021	07/04	★★★★☆
Antec Lanboy case	06/03	★★★★☆
Antec Sonata PC Chassis	06/03	★★★★★
Apple 23-inch Cinema HD Display	01/03	★★★★★
Asus Extreme AX800 XT 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★★
Asus Radeon 9800 XT	04/04	★★★★★
Asus V9980 Ultra graphics card	05/04	★★★★☆
Asus V9999 Gamers Edition Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★★
ATI 9600 XT	05/04	★★★★☆
ATI All-in-Wonder 9800	10/03	★★★★☆
ATI Radeon 9800 Pro	06/03	★★★★★
ATI Radeon X800 XT and XT Pro	08/04	★★★★★
ATI Radeon X800 XT PCI Express 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★★
Ati X600 XT	10/04	★★★★☆
BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★★
Bose Companion 3	07/04	★★★☆☆
Boxx Technologies GameBOXX	07/04	★★★★☆
Creative Labs Decoder DDTS-100	04/04	★★★★☆
Creative Labs Giga Works S750	04/04	★★★★★
Creative Labs MegaWorks THX 6.1 650	07/03	★★★★★
Cyberpower Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro	06/04	★★★★☆
Cyberpower Infinity 9900 Extreme	04/04	★★★★☆

ASUS Extreme AX800 XT 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Dell Dimension XPS	07/03	★★★★☆
Dell Dimension 8300	06/04	★★★★☆
Dell Generation 3 Dimension XPS	10/04	★★★★☆
Dell Inspiron XPS	09/04	★★★★★
Dell W20040 LCD TV	09/04	★★★★★
DFI LANParty 875Pro	09/03	★★★★☆
EMachine M6807	05/04	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox	10/03	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox 2	11/04	★★★★★
Falcon Northwest FragBox Pro	05/04	★★★★★
Falcon Northwest Mach V	06/04	★★★★★
Falcon Northwest Mach V Canterwood	07/03	★★★★★
Gateway 200 ARC	09/04	★★★★☆
Gateway 700XL	08/03	★★★★★
Gateway 710G Gamer	06/04	★★★★★
Gateway 710XL	01/04	★★★★☆
Gateway FMC 901X	05/04	★★★★★
Gateway M675	02/04	★★★★★
Gigabyte N68T256DH Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★☆
Hercules Prophetview 920 Pro DVI	03/04	★★★★★
Hypersonic Aviator AX6	05/04	★★★☆☆
Hypersonic Cyclone	01/04	★★★★☆
IBuypower Back to School Machine	09/04	★★★★☆
IBuypower Gamer Extreme	03/04	★★★★☆
IBuypower Titanium-XP	10/03	★★★★☆
IBuypower Zillion Pro PC	08/03	★★★★★
IBuypower Zillion-FX	06/04	★★★★☆
Ideazon Zboard keyboard	12/04	★★★★☆
Intel D925XCV	10/04	★★★★☆
Logitech MX510 Performance Optical Mouse	07/04	★★★★★
Logitech X620 6.1 Speakers	02/04	★★★★☆



Philips Brilliance 230W5VS 23-inch LCD monitor

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Logitech Z-2200	04/04	★★★★★
Logitech Z-3	04/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Z-5300	02/04	★★★★★
Logitech Z-5500	12/04	★★★★★
Microsoft Wireless Optical Desktop Elite	12/03	★★★★☆
Nvidia 128MB GeForce 6600 GT PCI	12/04	★★★★★
Nvidia 2004 MB GeForce FX 5900 Ultra	09/03	★★★★☆
Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra	08/04	★★★★★
Nyko Air Flo Mouse	12/03	★★★★☆
Nyko PC Air Flo EX	12/04	★★★★☆
PCFX Leviathan III	11/03	★★★★☆
Philips Acoustic Fusion 610	11/03	★★½☆☆
Philips Brilliance 230W5VS 23-inch LCD	01/05	★★★★★
Sennheiser PC-150 Headphones	12/03	★★★★☆
Shuttle SN45G	11/03	★★★★☆
Tapwave Zodiac	02/04	★★★★☆
Tek Panel 300	12/03	★★★★☆
Toshiba Qosmio E15-AV101	12/04	★★★★☆
Toshiba Satellite 5205-S705	09/03	★★★★☆
Toshiba Satellite P25-S670	09/04	★★★★★
Totally Awesome Computers Ridiculously Insane PC	01/04	★★★★☆
Velocity Micro Gamers Edge	01/04	★★★★☆
Velocity Micro Vector VX	06/03	★★★★★
Velocity Micro Vision 64	10/04	★★★★☆
Vicious PC MSI MEGA 865	08/04	★★★★☆
Vicious PC Ninja	06/04	★★★★★
Vicious PC Phantom II	06/03	★★★★☆
Voodoo Hexx c:355	06/04	★★★★★
VoodooPC Envy M:860	11/04	★★★★★
VoodooPC F1	01/04	★★★★★
VoodooPC F50	10/04	★★★★★
VoodooPC Voodoo Doll	02/04	★★★★☆
XFX Force Nvidia GeForce6600 GT 128MB DDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★☆

Logitech Z-5500 speakers

Fast Forward

Welcome to Fast Forward, COMV's monthly back-of-the-book [illegible] Every month, we'll offer up a handy reviews index, a few editors' picks, and [illegible] to think of.

GAMER'S EDGE: MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT

A walkthrough of the first—and toughest—part of the Guadalcanal level, with love from your friends at PrimaGames.

OBJECTIVE: RALLY UP WITH MARINES AT HENDERSON AIR FIELD

Follow your squad until you reach the edge of the enemy village. When the gunfire starts, seek cover and move around to the left of the village. Several enemy soldiers advance on your position, but they show up one at a time, so you can take them down easily.

Move further into the village and pick off the soldiers who run out of the hut on the right. Advance to the balcony of the hut and drop the soldiers manning the machine gun. Then deal with the remaining soldiers hiding at the village's far end.

Continue around to the left of the village to find a path leading to more huts. Take cover behind the trees and eliminate the soldiers hiding in the huts.

Rally up with your teammates, then follow your squad along the path to find the airfield. When the bombs start dropping, hop on the truck and enjoy the ride.

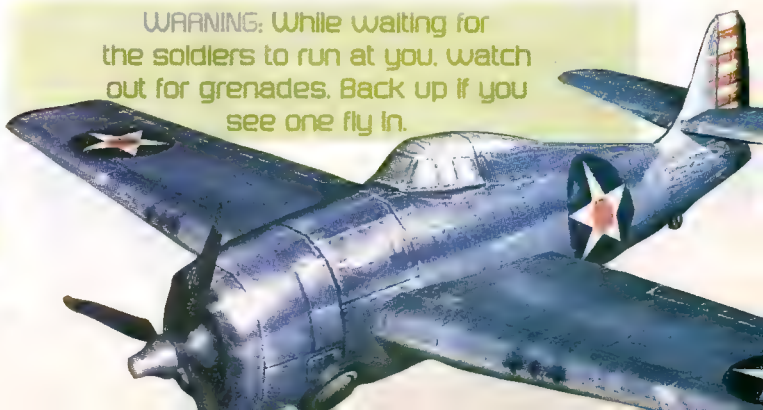
TIP: When all the soldiers are disposed of, check the huts for ammo and a map that will aid you later.

OBJECTIVE: SECURE ENEMY ARTILLERY POSITION

After your little "accident" on the truck, you wake up on a side path. Follow your squad to the edge of the enemy camp. Nail the soldier manning the machine gun, then creep up the hill and pick off the other soldier hiding behind the wall.

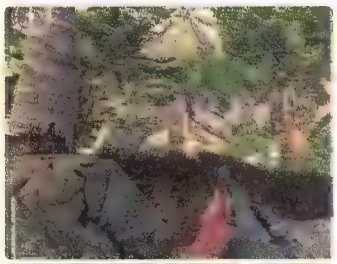
Climb up over the wall and [illegible] through the trench until you reach a turnoff to the right. Peek around the corner and plug the closest waiting soldier. Then back up and wait for more soldiers to [illegible] the clearing where the [illegible]

WARNING: While waiting for the soldiers to run at you, watch out for grenades. Back up if you see one fly in.



Take the path on the right and meet up with your squadmates. Gun down all the soldiers who jump over the wall and attack. When you've disposed of them, return to the clearing and set an explosive charge to destroy the artillery cannon.

OBJECTIVE: RETURN TO HENDERSON



Walk through the new hole in the side of the trench and stick with your squad. When you reach the edge of the enemy encampment, scan the buildings for targets. Once you've dealt with the immediate threat, push into the camp and finish off the survivors. Find the path at the end of the camp and continue.

As you move into the trees, the enemy will ambush you. Back up and take cover near the camp to take all the soldiers down. Keep following the path and watch for more soldiers in the distance.

Follow your squad to the edge of the river. When the enemy soldiers advance on your position, take cover behind the sandbags and gun them all down. When you've dealt with all of the soldiers, head down into the river and rally up. Follow the river to the first clearing, then take cover and get ready for a big fight.

Start by eliminating the soldiers who rush you from the right side of the river. Then pick off the other soldiers who advance from the far left side. When the large force runs at you, back up quite a bit along the river and take cover. From here, it's much easier to gun down the enemy as they slowly wade through the water. Once you've finally disposed of all the enemy troops, continue up the river

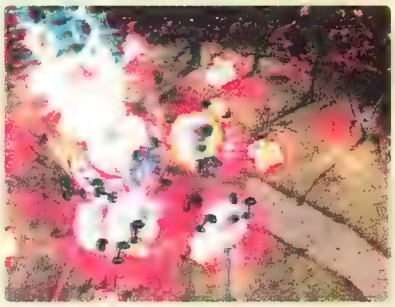
TIP: If you see a grenade fly toward your position, back up and take cover until it explodes.

and walk up onto the bank (follow your compass). Nail the soldier manning the machine gun, and then walk up over the wall and into the trench. Round the corner and pick off the soldiers near the artillery gun. When the tanks approach, get on the artillery and take 'em

Rewind 100

What should you play today? Names in red indicate Editors' Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Alida	Holiday 04	★☆☆☆☆
Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol	12/04	★★☆☆☆
Scapland	Holiday04	★★★★☆



GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Arena Wars	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
Aura: Fate of the Ages	10/04	★★★☆☆
Axis & Allies	01/05	★★★☆☆
Besieger	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Beyond Divinity	08/04	★★★☆☆
Breed	07/04	★☆☆☆☆
Call of Duty: United Offensive	12/04	★★★★☆
Campaigns on the Danube	12/04	★★★★☆
Catwoman	11/04	★☆☆☆☆
Chaos Legion	08/04	★☆☆☆☆
Chris Sawyer's Locomotion	Holiday 04	★☆☆☆☆
City of Heroes	08/04	★★★★★
Codename: Panzers	11/04	★★★★☆

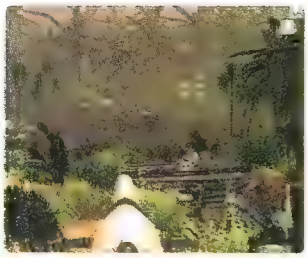
GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Conflict: Vietnam	01/05	★★★☆☆

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Conspiracies	05/04	★☆☆☆☆
Crusader Kings	08/04	★★★☆☆
Crystal Key 2	08/04	★★☆☆☆
CSI: Crime Scene Invest.	08/04	★☆☆☆☆
Dark Fall II: Lights Out	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
D-Day	01/05	
Dead Man's Hand	08/04	★★☆☆☆
Dead to Rights	04/04	★★½☆☆
Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy	01/05	★★★★½
Desert Rats vs. Afrika Korps	07/04	★★★☆☆
Doom 3	10/04	★★★★★

Evil Genius	12/04	★★★☆☆
Far Cry	06/04	★★★★☆
FIFA Soccer 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
FireStarter	06/04	★★★★★
Full Spectrum Warrior	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
Galactic Civilizations: Altarian Prophecy	12/04	★★★★☆
Gangland	06/04	★★★☆☆
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus	10/04	★★★★☆
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	11/04	★★★☆☆
Hitman: Contracts	08/04	★★★☆☆
Horizons: Empire of Istaria	05/04	★★☆☆☆
Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile	01/05	★★★☆☆
Jack the Ripper	05/04	★★☆☆☆

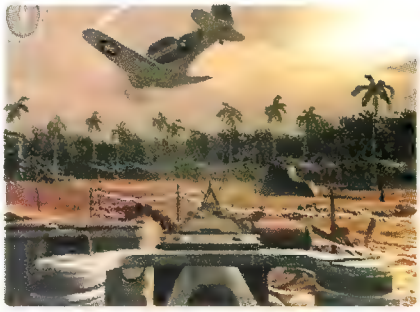
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	09/04	★★★★½
Judge Dredd	07/04	★★★☆☆



down. When the coast is clear, move down into the valley and follow the path to the left. More enemies are hiding in the bushes here, so stay covered and eliminate them all. Then keep following your compass through the brush.

OBJECTIVE: CLEAR THE CAMP OF ENEMIES

Follow the path until you reach the campsite. As soon as you enter the camp, enemy soldiers run in and attack. Take cover behind the buildings to dispose of them. When you reach the machine gun, quickly take up position behind it and gun down the soldiers who charge your position. When you've secured the area, walk to the small building next to the jeep and head through it to reach the airfield.



Start by picking off the enemies in the corner across the field. When that area is clear, move around the corner to the right and take down the soldiers who charge across the runway.

TIP: Before the soldiers run across the runway, quickly hop on the AA gun to the right of the trench and gun down the enemy. Sure, it's cruel, but it works.

OBJECTIVE: HELP FRIENDLY FIGHTERS GET AIRBORNE

Get on the AA gun and shoot down the enemy planes. Once all of your friendly planes have taken off, you're good to go.

NOTE: Enemy planes all have red circles on the bottom of their wings.

OBJECTIVE: RECLAIM WEST AA GUNS

Walk along the runway to the right. Eliminate the soldiers who run over the hills and the others near the building in the distance. Use the building as cover and clear the entire area of enemies.

WARNING: In this area, fighters frequently fly low and fire on your position. Don't stay in one spot for too long.

Keep moving west, dropping any enemy soldiers who get in your way. When you reach the AA gun, hop on and protect the hangars from the enemy planes. The dive-bombers fly in from the southwest, so aim up to the right of the hangars and take down the planes before they drop their bombs.

OBJECTIVE: SHOOT DOWN ZEROS CHASING THE BLACK CAT

Don't dismount that AA Gun just yet, soldier; there are more bogies to shoot down. Look for the Black Cat in the sky (it's a large black airplane) and aim for the planes chasing it. You need to lead the enemy planes to hit them, so aim at the Black Cat's tail.

THE chronicles OF EGGBERT

One gnome's journey through *World of WarCraft*

BY JEFF GREEN

Hi! My name is Eggbert, and I'm a gnome warlock! (OK, not really, but go along with me or the whole concept of this article is blown.) Over the next few months, you'll get to read the ongoing epic adventure of me, Eggbert, as I wander the lands of *World of WarCraft*, seeking fame and fortune and a better cape than the crappy one I've been stuck with since level 5. This is a chance not only to yammer self-indulgently about my character, but also to explore an MMORPG for longer than we normally get to around here—which is rarely past the newbie levels.

We begin now just as Homer began *The Iliad*; in medias res, with me, Eggbert, on the cusp of not only hitting level 17, but also getting my engineering skill up to 100, at which point I can make flying tiger goggles, which will boost my armor by 27 and give me +4 spirit and stamina. I know the suspense is killing you, so let's dive right in.

Eggbert hangs tough in Westfall with his pal Mini Diablo, Lord of Terror.

Here I join a class field trip through the streets of Stormwind.

This female gnome thinks I'm so hot, an exclamation point appears above her head!

Ah, the easy life of a warlock. I stand idly by while my voidwalker does all the work.

HOURS 30-40

After dying repeatedly around the vicinity of Sentinel Hill, I have given up on Westfall for now and head back to my home area of Loch Modan. (Actually, "home area" is a misnomer since the gnomes don't get a proper home, since Blizzard is racist that way.)

Some of the quests that were kicking my arse earlier here are now cakelike, especially since I've traded in my imp for a voidwalker, who dishes out serious damage. The Silver Mines quest, for example, I breeze through virtually unscathed, the only problem being all the other players who keep getting in my way. I'm hoping that in an upcoming patch, Blizzard can get rid of the other 250,000 players for me. That'd be cool.

Now I'm trying to fetch Bingles' freakin' missing supplies, which are scattered on an island in the middle of the loch, amongst a gaggle of trogg shaman and bonesnappers. This quest destroyed me before, but now I am ready, especially with my voidwalker doing the heavy fighting for me while I sit back and eat Cheetos at my desk. It takes me about three tries to get all those tools without dying. Those shaman are brutal, even when I'm at level 16. The quest would probably be easier if I grouped, but that would involve playing with some of those 250,000 others I am trying to get rid of. So forget it.

At last I get what I need *and* hit level 17, with 40 hours and 17 minutes of real time invested. Between deaths, I win an auction of light leather, so I can make those goggles. To celebrate, I spend the next half hour typing "/train" around other players. Try it—it will change your life.

Rewind 100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Kohan II: Kings of War	12/04	★★★★½
Kuma\War	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude	Holiday 04	★★☆☆☆
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	08/04	★★☆☆☆
Madden NFL 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★☆

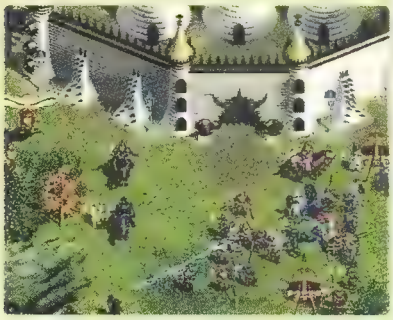
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	01/05	★★★★½
Men of Honor	01/05	★★★★☆
Missing: Since January	10/04	★★★★☆
Myst IV: Revelation	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
NHL 2005	01/05	★★½☆☆
Perimeter	09/04	★★½☆☆
Pitfall: The Lost Expedition	01/05	★☆☆☆☆
The Political Machine	11/04	★★★★½
Port Royale 2	12/04	★★★½☆
Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots	07/04	★★★★☆
Rome: Total War	Holiday 04	★★★★½

Sacred	07/04	★★★½☆
The Saga of Ryzom	01/05	★★★½☆
Secret of the Silver Earring	01/05	★★★★☆
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury	Holiday 04	★★½☆☆
Shadowbane: Rise of Chaos	04/04	★★½☆☆
ShellShock: Nam '67	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Shrek 2	09/04	★★★½☆
Silent Hill 4: The Room	01/05	★★½☆☆
The Sims 2	11/04	★★★★★

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Singles: Flirt Up Your Life	09/04	★☆☆☆☆
Soldiers: Heroes of WWII	11/04	★★★★☆
Soldner: Secret Wars	10/04	★★☆☆☆
Spider-Man 2	11/04	★★☆☆☆
Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow	06/04	★★★★☆
Star Chamber	05/04	★★★★★

Star Wars Battlefront	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
The Suffering	10/04	★★★☆☆
Thief: Deadly Shadows	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★★
TrackMania	10/04	★★★☆☆
Tribes: Vengeance	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
True Crime: Streets of L.A.	09/04	★★☆☆☆
Universal Combat	10/04	★★☆☆☆
Unreal Tournament 2004	06/04	★★★★★
Virtual Skipper 3	10/04	★★★★☆
Wanted: A Wild Adventure	Holiday 04	★★★★☆
War in the Pacific	11/04	★★★★☆
War Over Vietnam	Holiday 04	★★★☆☆
War Times	08/04	★★☆☆☆
Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior	07/04	★★☆☆☆



Warlords Battlecry III	08/04	★★★★☆
World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International	10/04	★★★★★

HIGH SCORE

What do we like at 1UP.com? Wouldn't you like to know...

Man, it's pretty cool to have something like 1UP.com at our constant disposal. I mean, since we spend most of our time spouting off about one thing or another, it's awfully nice to have a place that's devoted, essentially, to spouting off. Makes us feel a little like we belong to something. You, too, can have this feeling at http://cgwfans-club.1UP.com. Try it—you'll like it.

FEATURED BLOG

Dirty Diva
http://dirtydiva.1UP.com/

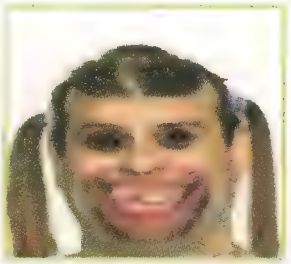
In keeping with our recent trend of highlighting wicked-cool female gamers, witness Dirty Diva, "Playing Games Since 1981." Check out her cojones for entering a gaming tournament even when she was ill*n'. Rock on, sistah!

CLUB OF THE MONTH

Old Farts Club
http://OldFarts-club.1UP.com-club.1UP.com

"Dedicated to those of us who can remember playing *Pong* in the arcades, watched *Star Wars* when it was first shown in the cinema, maybe dabbled in home computers when "consoles" were Atari, and know who these two old farts are...!"

STUPID PICTURE OF THE MONTH



AS IF WE NEEDED MORE PROOF THAT CGW FANS ARE THE MOST CLEVER PEOPLE ON EARTH, WE PRESENT THIS MONTH'S PICTORIAL OFFERING.

WHAT'S UP WITH 1UP?

A few words from 1UP.com's editor-in-chief

By the time you read this column, 1UP.com blogs will include a way to add comments, so users can respond to posts from others. It's something we've been planning to include since we relaunched the site months ago, but we haven't been able to because of higher priorities. You see, every day I'm faced with decisions on where 1UP.com should focus its attention. Should we fix certain bugs? Should we improve our game database? Should we work on enhancements like allowing comments on blogs? Even though comments were high on our list, other items kept on taking precedence—until one of our users happened to give us a nice kick in the pants.

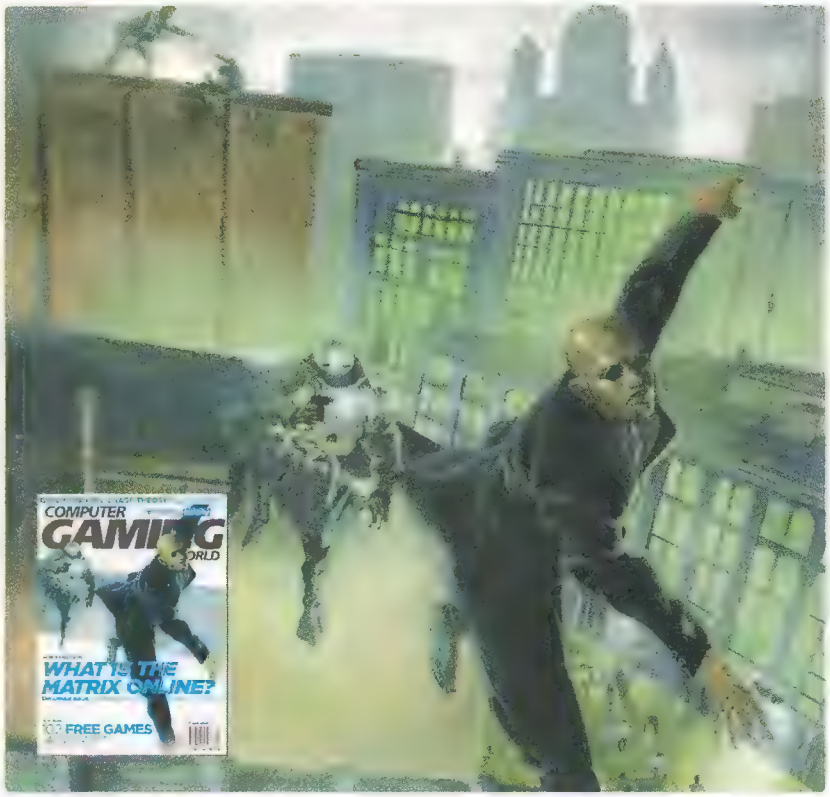
Tired of waiting, Lee Babin (http://lbabinz.1UP.com) devised his own comment system and integrated it into his blog posts. He even used 1UP's color scheme and fonts, making the experience perfectly seamless. In fact, he did such a nice job with it that other users started to employ his system. I loved seeing the ingenuity of 1UP's users, but it was a clear sign that we needed to get a move on a system of our own. So we've been hard at work on our comment system—and it's all thanks to Lee Babin. That jerk. Got ideas? Drop by the 1UP suggestion-box club at http://1UPsuggestions-club.1UP.com.

Sam Kennedy http://capnsmak.1UP.com/

SOUND OFF

CGW's readers speak up

We had the distinct pleasure of working with illustrator Paul Chadwick on our January 2005 cover image (below, box). Here's a look at the original artwork he was kind enough to create for us. What do you think? Let us know at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com.

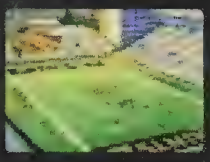


POLL OF THE MONTH

Five Jedi walk into a cantina. Only one walks out. Whom would you bet your credits on?

DESERT ISLAND GAMES

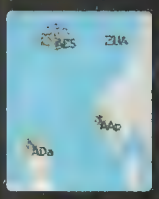
You're stranded on a desert island with only five PC games...which ones? E-mail us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Desert Island Games" (along with your name and city/state) and give us your picks!



Front Office Football
You're a general manager trying to increase the value of the franchise. You can concentrate on the economics or micromanage down to the level of calling plays in games, so there are many ways to play and replay. The 2001 edition was actually reviewed in *CGW*.

Heroes of Might and Magic
Still a great strategy game with lots of depth. I'd take the CD that has *Heroes I, II,* and *III* so I could go back and forth between the latter two.

Age of Rifles
I'm a sucker for the time period, traditional war games, and the ability to play "what if?" games with a scenario editor. Again, there are lots of ways to stave off boredom. Zulus versus Sioux, anyone?



Harpoon Classic
It's got an editor, lots of user-written scenarios, and the challenge of playing as an obvious underdog.

A Java development environment
When I got bored with everything else, I could write my own game. If I have to list a game, how about *RoboCode* (http://robocode.alphaworks.ibm.com/installer/index.html), which lets me build and program fighting robots?

Jamie Adams
Fairfax, VA

Tom vs. Bruce

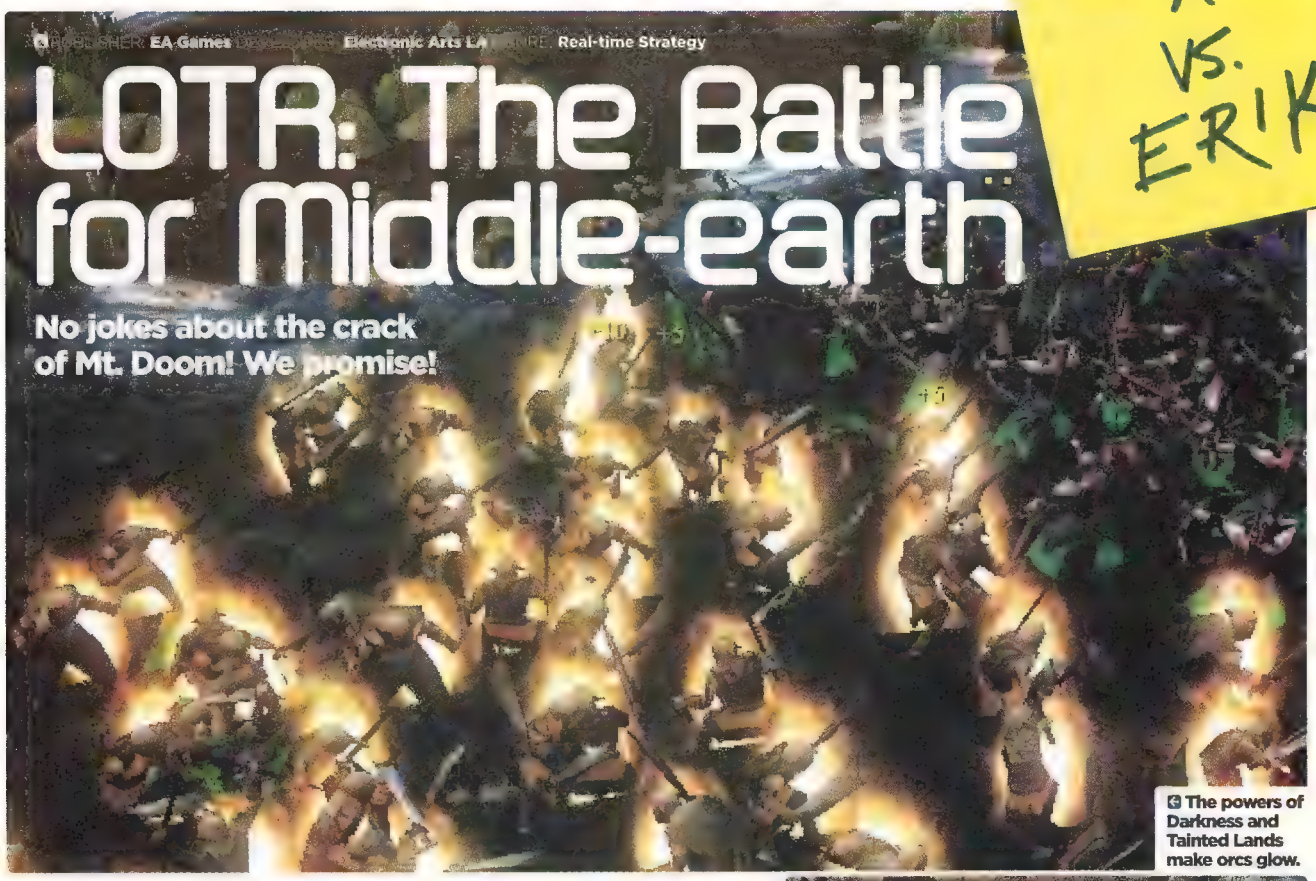
Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

^ VS. ERIK

PUBLISHER: EA Games DEVELOPER: Electronic Arts LA GENRE: Real-time Strategy

LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth

No jokes about the crack of Mt. Doom! We promise!



The powers of Darkness and Tainted Lands make orcs glow.

The soothing blue relief of Rohan's Heal ability.

Bruce: I asked Tom for a month off. We both knew it was because I was too busy playing *World of WarCraft*, but neither of us would admit it, so we shuffled our feet uncomfortably until Tom mentioned that this month's game was *Battle for Middle-earth*. I told him that Erik was a better choice for this anyway, since he's such a big fan, and Tom agreed. I'll be back next month.

Tom: I don't know a hobbit from a hacksaw. I've never read the hobbit books, and I wasn't paying close attention during the hobbit movies. But I do know real-time strategies. So when Erik said, "Umm, well, let's see, I guess I'll play...I dunno, I guess maybe these Mordor guys," I knew I had it made: Erik had chosen an evil side. This meant I'd be playing a good side. And in *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth*, the good side gets the walled cities, which are really tough to crack.

Erik: Tom is supernaturally good at these real-time strategy games. Evidently, though, he isn't quite so skilled at psychology. What possible advantage does he gain by revealing that he's completely ignorant of the game's source material? Other than the fact that I kind of remember that they all starred a gorilla, I don't know *Lord of the Rings* from *Planet of the Apes*, *Passion of the Christ*, or *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Tom doesn't know that, though. Accordingly, I implement my first real-time strategy before the game even begins: Operation Make Tom Think I Know Something He Doesn't. When he asks me if I've read the manual, I act distracted and say, "Huh? Oh sorry. I was reading *The Salmoniliad*. For the second time." Tom has no response. I assume he's pondering the giant mistake he made when he decided to challenge someone who knows so much about the history of *The Lord of the Rings*. I tell him that of course I read the manual, and then I growl, "Ma hasha'a" in the hope that he can't tell "What time is it?" in Hebrew from something scary in orc.

Tom: I can't make out what Erik is saying over Teamspeak, but it sounds like, "My rush is on." What he may not know is that there are warg lairs at each of the three crossings of the Entwash River, which divides the map into a northern and southern half. Wargs will stymie any cheap rushes.

Erik: Because I lied about reading the manual, I start at a slight disadvantage. Still, I've played enough of these games to know the drill: Buy whatever I can as fast as possible, build a ton of one type of unit, group them together, and then send them in a big clump toward Tom's side of the map.

Tom: I start in the north as Rohan, which doesn't have many units. Basically, they get archers and cavalry. Their farms can also recruit peasants, who are good for countering early attacks and later for shielding the archers

Erik: The only structures I can afford are furnaces, slaughterhouses, and orc pits. I build one of each. I click on my furnace and my slaughterhouse, but they don't appear to do anything. Well, good—that's two less

Erik Wolpaw
Special guest star
Erik's doing whatever he does when not guest starring. Something to do with sheep.

Tom
Last month
Tom lost at *Star Wars Battlefront* but doesn't care since the movies suck anyway.

Bruce
Last month
Bruce beat Tom handily because he chose the dark side—and they don't have Ewoks.

things to worry about.

Tom: Merry the hobbit is a cheap but useful hero. He's awful in battle, but his elven cloak keeps him invisible if he stays in one place. So I park him on the east crossing to keep an eye out for Erik approaching from this side. Merry spends the entire game sitting there with nothing to report.

Erik: The orc pit appears to make orcs. I don't know if the game is broken or if I somehow entered a cheat code or what, but the orcs are totally free. I know! I can't believe it either! I take a sly peek to my left and right, and then click the Make Orc button about 100 times.

Tom: Rohan's Draft power lets me arm my peasants. So I set each of my farms to building a few peasant battalions, then I click on Draft. In no time at all, I have a 100-peasant army.

Erik: Because my units are free, I'm socking away a ton of money for when Tom beats me and I can retire. I build a few more orc pits, and then I pad out my base with some more nonfunctional furnaces and slaughterhouses so that I don't accidentally build something in those spots that might divert my attention from clicking Make Orc as fast as I can.

Tom: My 100-peasant army pours across the Entwash's western crossing, killing the wargs on the way and smashing one of Erik's lumber mills. In the meantime, I'm investing a hefty chunk of change to build an armoury (i.e., armory) and research forged blades.

Erik: I have so many orcs that the game won't let me make any more. I'm kicking around the idea of sending them to attack Tom when all of a sudden, he attacks me. He's off in a remote part of my base where I'd been messing around and ended up building a lumber mill. I send my enormous orc army charging toward him.

Tom: A wave of orcs rolls in toward my peasants, but they stand ready in the riverbed, their forged blades flashing as the Entwash swirls around their feet. I stand ready with my newly purchased Heal ability.

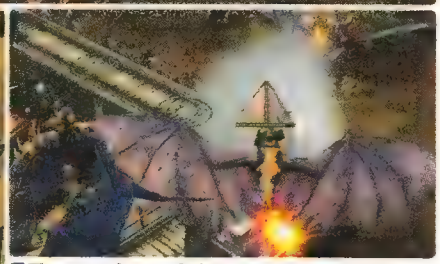
Erik: Bruce is gone, so there's nobody to call Tom a Communist. With that in mind, I tell Tom to wave good-bye to his peasant collective as I send my orcs into battle. Unfortunately, the People's Republic of Gondor makes a mean peasant. To my horror, they chew through my orcs like they're made of bologna, which, for all I know, they are.

Tom: This is easy. Too easy. I'd be a fool not to press my advantage. So I advance through another group of orcish reinforcements. Erik's main city is just ahead.

Erik: The bad news: The orcs I sent to the lumber mill and the lumber mill itself are all dead. The good news: Something unclogged my orc-making machine, and there're about 1,000 new recruits waiting back at base.

It's a mumakil multikill.

Erik's nazgul terrorizes Rohan.



The nazgul come in low, terrorizing rohirrim with their screams.

Tom: Unfortunately, Erik has built defensive towers around the city's perimeter, something I never do because I'd rather spend the money on armies. His orcs aren't a problem since they're coming out in an easily managed trickle, but the towers' arrows drive my peasants back for the time being. I use Heal again and set my farms to crank out reinforcements for what is now my about-60-peasant army.

Erik: Even though Tom is the Communist here, I'm the one who has to go through a painful session of self-criticism. A whole Death Star full of orcs isn't going to help me against Tom's mighty peasant army, much less against the Death Star he's probably building right now in space. My one advantage is that I have a ton of money. I discover that the tower in the center of my base manufactures something called a nazgul and something else called a Witch-king. They're expensive, which must mean they're good. I start building a nazgul.

Tom: My luck has run out. The nazgul can only be countered with ranged attacks, so my 60-or-70-peasant army is utterly helpless. Time to commence a full-scale retreat and rethink my strategy.

Erik: Holy crap—the nazgul is a giant orc that can fly! I queue up another one. Then I group my nazgul and all my orcs together and send them toward Tom's base.

Tom: Now I have a 10-peasant army cowering in my base. I've gone from 10 battalions to two decimated battalions. I'm building an archery range and a pair of defensive towers on my walls. Oh, and I close the gates. It's always embarrassing when someone attacks you and you forget to close the gates to keep them out.

Erik: One of the ESRB's rating categories is "Comic Mischief." This game should definitely get that rating because my nazgul is causing all sorts of comic mischief at Tom's fort. Though it's probably not so comic for Tom. I can't believe it either, but it looks like I'm going to win.

Tom: Archers on the way. More important, I'm saving up my money to bring out Legolas, whose Hawk Strike is particularly useful against nazgul.

Erik: Unlike my base, Tom's city somehow has walls. This sort of stymies my attempt to get in and knock everything over. Still, the nazgul is unimpeded by walls and is doing a good job all by itself.

Tom: Unfortunately, Erik has the presence of mind to have his nazgul target my archers as soon as they're trained. In between snacking on archers, he has the nazgul taking bites out of the archery range itself.

Erik: I notice that Tom has one unit standing in the middle of the courtyard firing arrows at my flying orc. It's called Legolas, and it's not dying like the rest of his crappy units. I Alt-Tab out to do some research on the Internet.

Tom: The Hawk Strike slams into the nazgul while the towers chip away at him. But you can't kill Ring Wraiths; you can only temporarily banish them. Unlike the other heroes who can be revived at a reduced cost, nazgul are free to revive once they've been purchased. This is going to be an archery-intensive game for me.

Erik: Pay dirt! I find something in the Sports & Outdoors section of Amazon called "The Fighting Knives of Legolas."

The description reads, "Legolas possessed great magical powers and the ability to create things of immense beauty, craft, and enchantment, including weaponry, music, language, and lore." Jeezus. If we're talking about the same Legolas, I may be in trouble. This guy does everything. Unfortunately, there's nothing in either the ad copy or the user comments about how to kill him. It's time for a tactical retreat.

Tom: Erik and I each have an outpost to the east of our starting cities. I take advantage of the lull in his attack to march my archers over to build stables at the outpost. My archers can keep the nazgul at bay while my rohirrim ride down the orcs.

Erik: While I was storming Tom's castle, I also managed to build a second nazgul and a Witch-king. And a bazillion new orcs. There appears to be nothing left to build, so I send my land orcs and my flying orcs on a tour of the map.

Tom: I just lost a massive battle on the Entwash's middle crossing. My veteran archers were mowing down Erik's orcs while the rohirrim ran interference. But then three nazgul, including the Witch-king, came swooping in, tearing up the rohirrim.

Erik: When I'm not writing nasty letters to *CGW* complaining about Tom, I spend a lot of my time just sitting around the house wondering what Tom's doing. This was one of those times. As it turned out, he was building a giant army and then marching it to the wall-free zone here in Mordor.

Tom: Erik outmaneuvers me by sending three nazgul against my outpost and knocking it down before I can bring up my archers. Now I'm pushed back into the corner of the map. I use Legolas' Train Archers ability, which levels up the elven warriors I can now build at my busy archery range. I also bring out Aragorn and Theoden—it's the return of the kings! These two heroes give nearby units a leadership bonus for quadruple damage. I also buy the Anduril power to boost Aragorn's attacks.

Erik: Not only does Tom have Renaissance man Legolas with him, he's now got somebody called Aragorn. Amazon's description of the *Lord of the Rings* 20-inch Talking Aragorn figure is brief and largely uninformative, though it does feature the ominously all-caps warning, "CHOKING HAZARD."

Tom's peasants with forged blades roll over Erik's orcs.

The [illegible] army [illegible] the edge of Erik's [illegible]

Tom: My three intrepid heroes move south with five battalions of elven archers and two battalions of rohirrim archers. We cross the west end of Entwash.

Erik: As I grimly await the severe choking my troops are about to receive, Tom pulls another surprise out of his hippy bag of nasty tricks and patchouli oil. All of his guys have bows and flaming arrows, like the Dukes of Hazzard.

Tom: After we've crossed the river, the orcs start rolling in. Our fire arrows cut down the first orcs as they arrive. But then Erik lays down a patch of Tainted Land, apparently by accident because he keeps asking me how I'm making the ground all black. We pull back so we can hit the orcs as they step out of the taint. Aragorn hurtles himself into the beasts, using the call of Elendil to stun them, slaughtering them with Anduril's glowing blade. But then the nazgul come flying in low, scattering rohirrim with their screams. The archers kill one nazgul, and the front ranks of peasants sacrifice themselves keeping the other two busy. Soon, all the orcs are dead and a single wounded Ring Wraith is driven away. I wash my men and elves in the cool blue light of Rohan's Heal power and move unopposed on Erik's city.

Tom pulls another surprise out of his hippy bag of tricks and patchouli oil.

Erik: Great. Now all of my buildings are on fire, too. This is getting embarrassing. For Tom. It's like he entered the Special Olympics. I mean, sure he's winning, but look at the competition.

Tom: I've taken down the towers defending the northern approach to his city. Now I'm destroying the slaughterhouses and furnaces that drive Mordor's economy.

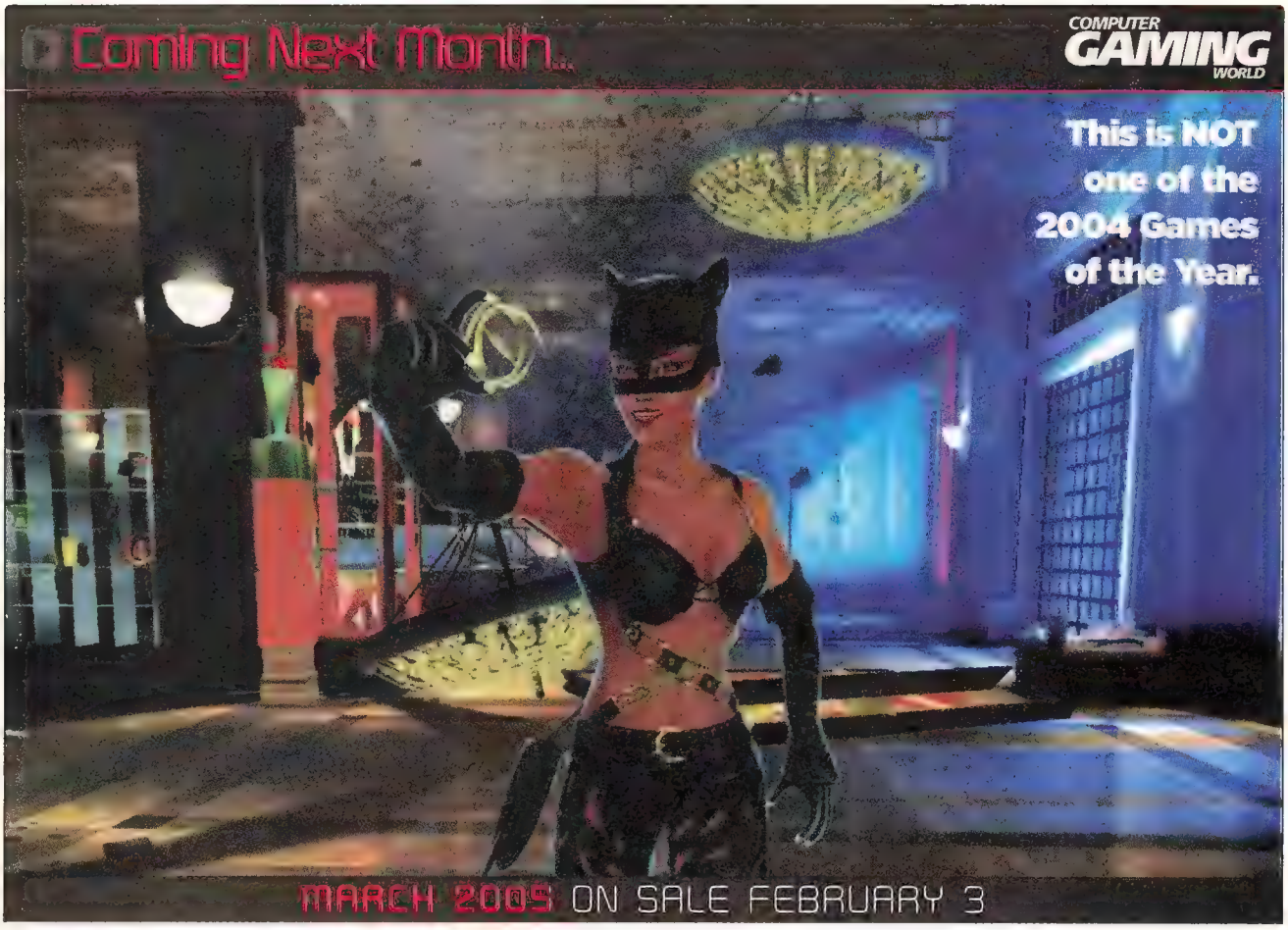
Erik: Wait a minute! Somewhere along the line I made a backup fort off to the side of my main base. One thing led to another and I ended up with a building there that produces something other than orcs. Since it's not in flames, Tom evidently doesn't know about this place. I order up a whole mess of what look like elephants and then I send them thundering toward the charred remains of my city.

Tom: A mumakil approaches! I fall back to make my stand in a patch of Elven Woods that I'd dropped to defend my archers from Erik's towers. But just as the behemoth falls, I see three more on the way with hordes of orcs at their feet. Calling Elendil once again, Aragorn holds off the orcs while the archers fire their burning arrows into the slowly advancing mumakils. It's a nerve-racking exercise in standing our ground, but the huge beasts move so slowly that our arrows drop them just before they reach our front ranks.

Erik: This time it's Tom who gets the nasty surprise! Oh no, wait, that's me getting a nasty surprise again. I guess I forgot to specify that I wanted the elephants that aren't smeared with gasoline, because they appear to be even more flammable than Witch-kings.

Tom: At the very end, I use my power points to summon ent allies, who lumber into Erik's base and smash his citadel. Mordor is defeated by a multinational coalition of races, nations, and species.

Erik: I give up just moments before I lose, which means Tom can't beat me because I already quit. Anyway, now Tom can convert Mordor to some Thomas Kinkade village that everybody would think looked like ugly, sentimental crap if hobbits didn't live there.



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Tanks for the Mammaries

Sex and violence, the candy of life

We recently got a lot of mail about us having the temerity not only to run a preview of *Playboy: The Mansion*, but for running ads for the new *Leisure Suit Larry* game. Apparently, the idea of digitized nipples so enormous they could put an eye out disturbed several of you. To you most gentle readers, I apologize; further, I would also like to advise you to steer clear of any mag running an ad for *BloodRayne 2*—you will never see anything catering more to titillation (except that other *BloodRayne 2* ad catering to buttilation). I'd also like to apologize to those offended by the cover of our magazine that featured a bloody demon holding a chain saw. I would like to, but I can't—there aren't any of you. Still, I'd like to tell all of you that, however immature, these are adult products intended for adults and that you should just grow up, accept it, and be adult about it. Again, I'd like to, but I'm still trying to figure out a way to tell the Sybil-caliber schizophrenics running this industry the same thing.

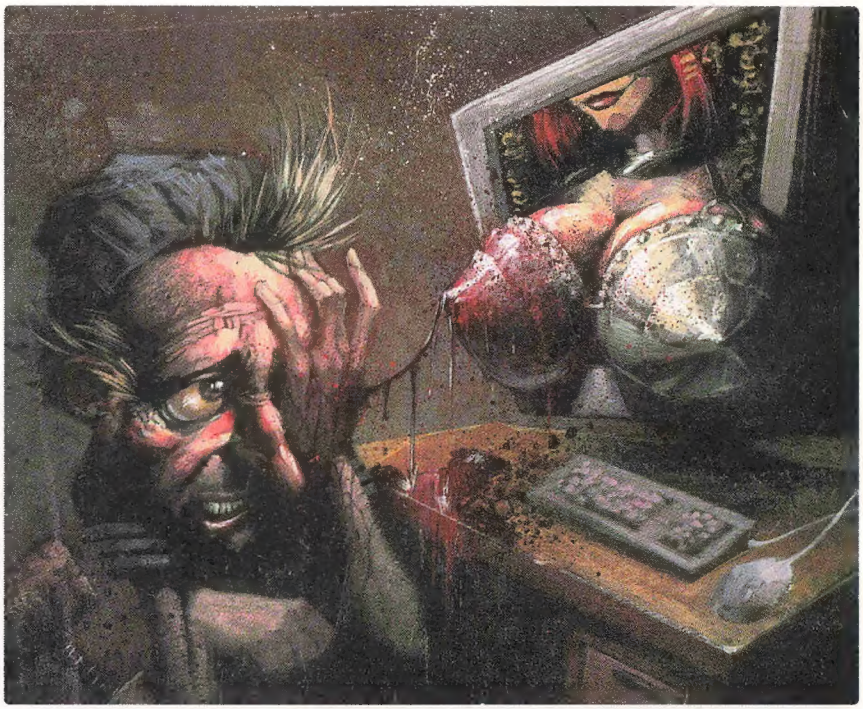

ILLUSTRATION BY JON WAYSHAK

The idea of nipples so big they could put an eye out disturbed several of you.

Because the game industry is just being dishonest. To itself and to you. It is embarrassed by itself (the same way I was embarrassed by using my first computer to devote three years of my life to playing *Earl Weaver Baseball* instead of writing the works of genius I told everyone I got it for) so it tries to be respectable, and that plays out in really, really weird and conflicted ways. Not too long ago, we commissioned a *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* illustration for our cover, and we were really happy with it. EA, on the other hand, not so much with the happy-happy. And that was because our infantryman had a cigarette in his mouth. This is a game that not only asks you to kill about a thousand people, but one that actually tracks how many times you shoot them in the head. This is a game where the potentially offensive "Jap" epithet is uttered several hundred times. (For the record, I have no problem with "Jap" in this game—it makes complete sense in the world of the game, and I would have found the more politically correct "Beware! A Japanese squad, soldiers much like ourselves, men practically our brothers but who have become our adversaries through no fault of their own and are only fulfilling their duty to their country lurk immediately ahead!" almost as jarringly out of place as that whole piloting sequence.) With rampant death and killing, the horrors of war, and racial slurs to choose from, EA decides it must distance itself from the cigarette in a war hero's mouth. What is it protecting us from? What is it protecting itself from?

And what is Warner Bros. protecting itself from when it objects to last month's *The Matrix Online* cover? It wasn't happy because comic-book wunderkind Paul Chadwick—at our request—put a gun in the hand of the guy chasing Morpheus. Apparently, Warner Bros. doesn't want its movie license associated with guns because, you know, no one thinks of guns when they think of the *Matrix* movies. I know I don't—I think about the sound of an infinite number of shell casings cascading upon marble floors, but I don't think about guns. This aversion to violence is perfectly understandable when you consider Warner Bros.' track record: This is the company that gave us such paeans to peace as *Cradle 2 the Grave*, *Terminator 3*, and the Nobel Peace Prize–winning *Goodfellas*.

Yet this pales in comparison next to the guilty-hearted contortion of logic that forbids writers working for a blatant industry cheerleader to tell some of the most basic truths about gaming to people who truly know better. This happens in the E3 *Show Daily*, the free Ziff-Davis published "newspaper" handed out at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, an industry-only event. In this paragon of publishing verisimilitude, the word "shooter" is forbidden. As are "kill," "gun," and "hack up with a chain saw." Because God forbid people working in the game industry get the misperception that *Doom 3* and *Far Cry* are games in which you shoot at things (and maybe even people).

So let's get over ourselves here. There's nothing to feel guilty about, nothing to apologize to ourselves or mankind about, nothing to hide. This is a hobby for grown-ups, for mature people who know that playing *Hitman* doesn't make them any more an amoral person than playing *City of Heroes* makes them a fireball-blasting agent of justice or any more than a cigarette in a tired soldier's mouth is a YES vote for lung cancer. As grown-ups, we can make grown-up distinctions and judgments and we can enjoy grown-up things.

And if those grown-up things make us feel like kids again, well, what's so wrong about that? **Robert Coffey**
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Computer Gaming World (ISSN 0744-6667) is published monthly by Ziff Davis Media, Inc., 28 E. 28th St., New York, NY 10016. Postmaster: Send address changes to Computer Gaming World, P.O. Box 57167, Boulder, CO 80322-7167. Canadian GST registration number is 865286033. Publication Mail Agreement No. 40009221. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to PO Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4R6. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY 10016 and additional mailing offices. Printed in the U.S.A.

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